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The first fifteen years of the Research and Documentation Centre of the Ministry of Justice, Netherlands

by J.J.M. van Dijk

I. Background

The Ministry of Justice of the Netherlands deals with the rural police, the public prosecutors, the courts, the prisons and with a wide range of legal issues, concerning both civil and criminal matters.

The forerunner of the present Research and Documentation Centre, called the Information and Documentation Centre, was established in the early sixties. Its original functions were the collection and dissemination of criminological information, in particular information about the treatment of offenders. The Centre sponsored university-based research on penological topics on a moderate scale. In 1972/1973 the Centre was restructured by its newly appointed director, the former professor in criminology of Groningen University, Prof. W. Buikhuisen. The new, enlarged outfit continued to subcontract empirical research to the universities. Its main task, however, became the execution of in-house, policy oriented research projects. The rather unusual decision of the Ministry to establish an in-house research centre was prompted by a concurrence of circumstances. First, it was felt by the management of the Ministry that the rising problems of crime needed to be tackled by innovative strategies which went beyond the traditional ways of administering criminal law. It was felt that social research might be helpful in the development of such policies. It was also believed that the existing criminological research centres at the universities were unlikely to satisfy this newly felt demand for policy oriented research. Some of these centres specialized in theory formation (Nijmegen), others propagated the abolition of the criminal justice system (Rotterdam, Free University

J.J.M. van Dijk

of Amsterdam). The establishment of an in-house research centre, as suggested by Buikhuisen, would guarantee a sufficient measure of control over the research programme and would at the same time facilitate the dissemination of research findings amongst the civil service, public prosecutors and higher police officers (Buikhuisen, 1976).

In its new quality of an in-house research centre, the centre was made up of two research units - one specializing in criminology and police science and the other in penological subjects - a unit for the sponsoring of external research and a documentation department. In its first years, the centre was comprised of 14 research officers, many of whom were recruited from the other criminological research centres. The existing information bulletin which offered an overview of relevant literature was transformed into a journal on policy oriented research in the area of crime and justice.

Since its foundation the centre has been reorganized several times in order to meet new demands. So far, the centre seems to have gone through three distinct stages which correspond roughly to the "reign" of three different directors. Each of these stages will be discussed below.

II. Policy-oriented survey research (1972-1977)

During its first years the centre was seeking to achieve credibility with each the ministry, the press and academic community. It embarked upon an extensive series of survey-type research projects in order to build up a body of empirical knowledge about crime and justice in the Netherlands. Probably the project which is most characteristic for this period is the annual victimization survey, introduced in 1974 (Van Dijk and Steinmetz, 1984). Other major studies dealt with the seriousness scaling of crimes by the public, the police and public prosecutors, crime reporting by the press and fear of crime (Van Dijk, 1978), as well as special victimization surveys among retailers and pub-owners. The centre also conducted large-scale time spending studies among probation officers and the uniformed police (Junger-Tas, 1978) and descriptive studies of prosecution and sentencing decisions. In most instances these studies were initiated with the objective to guide the development of new policies in a particular field, for example the programming of basic

police training or the introduction of prosecution guidelines. Some of the studies attracted a wave of mass media coverage which helped the centre to become well known. The impact of these first empirical studies upon decision-making was found to be relatively small, however, considering the investments. After some discussion it was decided that the ministry would probably benefit more from the centre if the administrative rank of the senior researchers would be upgraded. In other words, the decision was made to invest more in the quality of the scientific staff than is usual for an in-house research centre of a ministry.

III. Evaluation and consulting (1977-1983)

In 1977 the ministry appointed four senior staff members at the centre who were to act as liaisons between specialized research units and the four main divisions of the ministry (legislation, police, courts, prisons/probation). These so-called "counselors" - an honorary title traditionally reserved at the ministry for senior drafters of legislation were given the dual tasks of supervising one of the four research units and acting as policy consultants of a particular division at the other. The size of the centre was fixed at 40 of which 25 were to be researchers. Since 1977 a formal research programme is prepared biannually by the research units, after consultation with the directorates. The programme is formally approved by the Minister of Justice. In practice, the choice of research topics has never been a source of disputes between the researchers and relevant administrators. For each major research project, a steering committee is established with representatives of all concerned directorates and/or external interest groups. The director of the centre, however, is fully and exclusively responsible for the research design and the contents of the final report. Draft reports are not presented for approval to any official outside the centre.

Around the time when this reorganization took place, Buikhuisen left the centre to become professor of criminology of Leyden University and was succeeded by Dr. D. Steenhuis. In the Steenhuis period between 1977 and 1983, the practice of conducting large-scale surveys was continued. New studies of this type dealt with time-spending by solicitors/barristers and judges, and with the payment of alimony by ex-spou-

ses. Besides these descriptive studies, the four research units started with a series of research projects which were meant to evaluate particular policies of the ministries' directorates. Examples are studies on the effectiveness of prosecution guidelines for drunken driving, early-aid programmes for arrested persons, special units for addicted detainees, strike forces of criminal investigation departments, and the aftercare for police officers who serve in anti-riot squads.

The appointment of four counselors at the centre who act as brokers between research units and administrators and the ensuing emphasis upon studies evaluating special policies seem to have paid off: the impact of RDC-studies and general social research findings on the development of government policy, was greatly enhanced. Both among researchers and administrators there was some disillusionment, however, with the findings of some of the evaluation studies. Several of the programmes evaluated were found to be rather unsuccessful considering their primary objectives. At the same time, some of the counselors and other senior researchers became recognized experts on certain subjects. These two factors led the RDC to become closely involved in the design of new policies, rather than only in their evaluation at a later stage.

IV. Task forces and the evaluation of policy experiments (1983 - 1988)

In 1983 Dr. Steenhuis left the RDC to become deputy prosecutor general and was succeeded by the present author. In the following years it became standard practice for the Minister to invite senior researchers of the RDC to take part in task forces or departmental policy committees. RDC staff served, for instance, on committees dealing with the planning of new prisons, the redistribution of police manpower, the preparation of guidelines for the use of pre-trial detention and a wide range of legislation issues such as company fraud, payment of alimony, computer fraud and community service orders. In many cases such task forces took the initiative to launch a policy experiment to be evaluated by the RDC before final recommendations were made. An example are the experiments with community service orders.

The single most important activity of the RDC in these years was its contribution to the report of a committee which was asked to advise

the government about its policies concerning frequently occurring crimes like vandalism, theft and burglary (The Roethof Committee). This committee recommended the introduction of an extensive programme of social crime prevention measures to be implemented by other ministries and local authorities. Partly as a follow-up to this report, the Minister of Justice presented a white paper to Parliament, called *Society and Crime*, which announced a range of new policy initiatives for the period 1985 to 1990 (Ministry of Justice, 1985). The RDC played a key role in the drafting of this paper, which clearly bears the mark of previous RDC publications. Much emphasis is put on social crime prevention policies, based on social control and opportunity theories, on victim policies and on community service orders.

A special budget was created for the sponsoring of local authority crime prevention projects of approximately 6 million ECU's per year. Of this budget 10 percent was earmarked for the execution of evaluation studies of these new policies. This additional budget enabled the RDC to form a special team of consultants and evaluators, specializing in social crime prevention (Van Dijk and Junger-Tas, 1987). The centre also launched a new journal on crime prevention which is currently distributed among 18 000 school teachers, youth workers, police officers and other relevant professions.

Other developments were the integration of the small research group on policing of the Ministry of the Interior into the centre, and an extension of international contacts. Two volumes with articles in English about research, on the juvenile justice system and the prisons system, have been issued in the centres' series "Dutch Studies on Crime and Justice" (Brand-Koolen, 1987; Junger-Tas and Block, 1988). In 1988 the centre took the initiative to establish the International Crime Prevention Information Network. Major documentation centres from fifteen different countries have agreed to exchange references to new publications through a multilingual datafile programme for use on personal computers. The centre also coordinated the preparation and execution of an international victimization survey through computer-aided telephone interviewing in 15 different countries in the beginning of 1989 (Van Dijk, Killias and Mayhew, 1989).

V. Present situation and prospects

In 1989 the RDC comprises a staff of 41 persons on a permanent basis and another 30 on two-year contracts. The centre has a budget for in-house research of around 1 million ECU - largely spent on personnel on contracts - and a budget for external research of 0,5 million ECU. The latest development is the establishment of a special bureau for statistical information and policy analysis at the centre. The Bureau's mission is the storage, linkage and analysis of computerized datafiles on crime, criminal justice as well as civil justice. The establishment of this bureau is predicated upon the assumption that in the coming years a wealth of computerized data will become available for integrated policy analyses, through the linkage of files.

It is hard to predict the future developments in and around the centre. Within the Ministry the communication between RDC staff and policy makers is further facilitated by the presence of a large number of former RDC-people in senior positions within the directorates. The present head of the directorate for probation/child protection, Dr. Maria Brand-Koolen, was recruited from the RDC. The head of the newly established directorate for crime prevention will be the author from April 1989 onwards. A close collaboration between the RDC and these two directorates in particular is to be expected in the coming years.

At times there has been some pressure to transform the centre into a formally independent research centre outside the ministry. It is argued by some that such severing of ties with the Ministry would enhance the academic objectivity of the centre. Others favour it as part of the general trend towards privatisation of state-run services. At present both the Ministry and the RDC staff prefer to continue the present set-up, although conflicts about RDC publications do occasionally occur. There is consensus that on balance an in-house research centre is to be preferred over a centre which works independently of the Ministry. The major advantage of in-house research is its greater impact upon the development of policy. There is growing concern, however, about the rapidly deteriorating conditions for criminological research at the Dutch universities. Initiatives to revitalize university-based criminological research will probably be taken, with support from the Ministry of Justice in the near

future. This initiative aims to restore the balance between in-house policy oriented criminological research and academically oriented studies.

VI. Data Protection

Under the 1989 Data Protection Act no obligation exists to register data files with personal data which are used for research purposes. The Act lays down the principle that holders of data files can transfer personal data without permission from the persons involved to statisticians or researchers, if this does not cause an unreasonably severe intrusion upon their privacy. This offers ample opportunities for analyses of court files etc. However, according to the code of practice for criminological research, developed by the Dutch Society for Criminological Research in 1983, researchers are not allowed to contact the persons involved for interviewing on the basis of data acquired from such files without their consent. This means that criminologists are not allowed to draw samples of offenders or victims from administrative files. The linkage and analysis by researchers of data which have been collected for other purposes is in principle permitted.

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J.J.M. van Dijk

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