

A Comparison of Different Countries' Criminal Justice Systems: Perspectives from the Netherlands

By: Thomas Schiller

The authors of *Legal Infrastructure of the Netherlands in International Perspective: Crime Control* conduct a parallel study of the Netherlands' "legal infrastructure" (rules, judicial organization, and enforcement) as it relates to crime control with nine other countries: Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, United Kingdom, and the United States.¹ Its purpose is to provide a "benchmark" to measure future performance.

The study examines where the Netherlands stands in comparison to the above countries, and to spotlight findings that would be of value to the Ministry of Justice in deciding future priorities in the areas of legislation, law enforcement, the trial process, corrections and reentry.

This study uses an opportunity theory-based comparison to establish parameters for analysis (urbanization, volume of international traffic of goods and services, other societal and structural factors).² Countries were selected as comparable with the Netherlands from a socioeconomic standpoint, with effective legal systems. The choice was limited to countries fitting these general parameters, and that collected crime data.³

The types of crime studied were crimes against the person: murder and other violent crime, threats of violence; property crime, theft, burglary, car theft. Crime in the commercial sector was also compared: this included workplace violence, drug and alcohol abuse, fraud, copyright infringement. Drug-related crime was considered as a separate category, as was public sector crime, in this case referring to tax evasion and corruption. The authors also examined data on public perceptions of crime and their own safety.⁴

The authors compare responses to crime by the private sector (private security services, installation of anti theft technology by businesses) and the state. Effectiveness of response by the police, prosecution, and correctional services is measured on an expenditure per unit (inhabitant, 100,000 inhabitants, police officer, recorded crime, prisoners, etc.). The authors consider other potential measures of effectiveness as well.⁵

In the study's findings, van Dijk and de Waard of necessity limit themselves to what is comparable, and what is relevant to government policy makers. The Netherlands ranks in the middle of the countries studied for murder and violent crime against persons and businesses; has a comparatively low level of government corruption; and ranks high in the amount of minor crime against persons and businesses. Key comparative findings highlight the lack of personal and private sector crime prevention initiatives, low expenditure on law enforcement (with concomitant public perceptions of an ineffective police force), and an under-resourced judicial sector.⁶

The added value of this study is its utility for analysts from the other countries that are the basis for comparison with the Netherlands. For example, how does the United States rank compared to the other countries in the study? A selection of comparisons is listed below:

- Murders per 100,000 inhabitants (1997): First with 6.95. This figure is almost three times that of the next highest, Finland.⁷
- Persons killed by firearms per 100,000 inhabitants (1994): First with 14.24, which is almost three times higher than the second-highest, France.⁸
- Victims of violence and threats per 100,000 inhabitants (1995): Second to the United Kingdom with 5,700.⁹
- Households in possession of a firearm per 100,000 inhabitants (1994/95): Second with 36,200 to Finland's 50,000.¹⁰

- Arrests for drug offences per 100,000 inhabitants (1995/96): First with 539, followed by Australia with 313.¹¹
- Police personnel per 100,000 inhabitants (1998): Fourth, with 354. Austria is first with 420, followed by France and the United Kingdom.¹²

The study suffers from the problems that many comparative studies have: the data is sometimes incomplete; the lag time between data collection and analysis is large enough that some conclusions are of limited value, the sociopolitical context is missing, and the reliability of some of the statistics is open to question. The authors freely admit this,¹³ and for the purposes of the study, the data given present an interesting comparative overview of crime in different countries and the resources they have available to combat it. One area that US-centric researchers may find frustrating is that all monetary data are presented in the single European currency unit (the Euro) rather than the US dollar.

References

- 1 .F. van Dijk and J. de Waard, *Legal Infrastructure of the Netherlands in International Perspective: Crime Control*, Ministry of Justice Directorate for Strategic Development (the Hague, Netherlands, 2000).
- 2 .Van Dijk and de Waard, pp. 15-16.
- 3 .Van Dijk and de Waard, p. 14.
- 4 .Van Dijk and de Waard, pp. 17-30.
- 5 .Van Dijk and de Waard, pp. 38-43.
- 6 .Van Dijk and de Waard, pp. 4-5.
- 7 .Van Dijk and de Waard, p. 18.
- 8 .Van Dijk and de Waard, p. 18.
- 9 .Van Dijk and de Waard, p. 19.
- 10 .Van Dijk and de Waard, p. 35.
- 11 .Van Dijk and de Waard, p. 27.
- 12 .Van Dijk and de Waard, p. 39.
- 13 .Van Dijk and de Waard, p. 14.