

Summary

Crime, age and ethnicity

About the deviant age-crime curves for Antilleans and Moroccans residing in the Netherlands

Several studies by researchers show that the crime rate amongst individuals of non-western origin residing in the Netherlands is higher than the crime rate amongst the average Dutch population. This study too shows that things are none too bright where it concerns crime among non-western immigrants if we compare the figures to those among the people of Dutch native heritage. A striking feature in studies subdividing the group of non-western immigrants into separate ethnic groups often is the high crime rate among Antilleans and Moroccans. There is something peculiar about the age-crime curves relating to these two groups that have the highest crime figures registered. As it turns out, the crime figures among Antilleans residing in the Netherlands remain very high for offenders in their twenties and thirties, unlike other major ethnic groups residing in the Netherlands. It is not until they have turned forty that we notice a clear drop in crime figures among Antilleans. Another exception is that the so-called age-crime curves show extremely high crime rates for Moroccans teenagers residing in the Netherlands – by comparison much higher than the crime rates relating to other ethnic groups.

Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to get a better insight into the backgrounds of the deviances in the age-crime curves for Moroccans and Antilleans. To that end, we will try to answer the following three questions:

- 1 To what extent does the age-crime curve for Antilleans and Moroccans differ from the 'conventional' age-crime curve?
- 2 What are the underlying causes of the high percentage of offenders among Antilleans in their twenties, thirties and forties compared to the overall percentage of offenders among Antilleans?
- 3 What causes the high percentage of offenders among Moroccan teenagers compared to the overall percentage of offenders among Moroccans?

Method

This research comprises a literature review covering both the Dutch case and similar situations abroad, and quantitative analyses of data regarding people who are registered as an offender in the Netherlands. For the latter aspect, we have used integrated population data that can be analysed at individual level. The data relate to the year 2005.

Results

The 'conventional' age-crime curve is characterized by quickly rising crime figures during puberty, which peak in the late adolescence and early adulthood. The crime figures subsequently go down fast among people in their twenties and thirties. Crime figures relating to middle-aged people are comparatively very low. For this study, the *Herkenningsdienststelsel* (HKS; Identification Service System) of the police was used to construct the age-crime curves for Antilleans, Moroccans, Turks, Surinamese and people of Dutch native heritage. The latter three fit the above pattern, albeit showing some irregularities. For the purpose of verifying the extent to which the age-crime curves relating to Antilleans and Moroccans differ from that relating to people of Dutch native heritage, we have divided the first two curves by the third one. As the curve relating to people of Dutch native heritage is assumed to be 'conventional' in terms of shape, this contributes towards finding the answer to the first question. If the curves had a similar shape, this should result in a horizontal line. For Antilleans, however, we see a rising overrepresentation of people in their twenties which ends in a big overrepresentation of people in their thirties and forties. After the age of 50, the overrepresentation of registered crime figures relating to Antilleans compared to people of Dutch native heritage drops fast. For Moroccans, the older they get, the more the overrepresentation falls. In addition, we carried out regression analyses for this study, in which the dependent variable was whether or not someone was registered as offender. In addition to several demographic and socio-economic background characteristics, we also included an interaction variable of country of origin and age as independent variables in the models. A significant interaction effect suggests a rather different age-crime curve. After graphing these interaction effects, it is possible to verify whether the different age-crime curves are still different once the various background characteristics have been accounted for. The multivariate analyses for adults between 18 and 37 described above showed that the effect of being of Moroccan origin diminishes as Moroccans get older. For Antilleans, we have found the opposite. These findings are in line with those found in the descriptive analyses.

The deviant age-crime curves for Antilleans and Moroccans are incompatible with the widespread thesis in criminology that age-crime curves have the same shape for all ethnic groups in all socio-economic and cultural situations. This thesis was advanced in 1983 by criminologists Hirschi and Gottfredson in an article that was published in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Prior research, however, had already shown that the age-crime curve in farming societies differed slightly from that in (post) industrialized societies and that the curves for specific crime types also showed significant differences. The implication of the thesis of Hirschi

and Gottfredson that the shape of the age-crime curve does not differ for the various ethnic groups within a country has by contrast hardly been challenged in criminological literature. The strength of this pillar supporting the thesis has decreased significantly by the results of this study.

This study has found indications that the high level of broken families is an underlying cause for the comparatively high rate of offenders among adult Antillean men up to approximately 45 years. As a result, adult Antillean men lack the influence of a family of their own which tempers their propensity for committing crimes. Having a family of their own increases the potential cost associated to crime. The risk of being sentenced to a term of imprisonment will, for example, be a greater deterrent for someone who has the responsibility for a family than for a single person. The crime figures among Antillean women in their twenties and thirties also remain very high. This can be explained by the fact that women who become involved in criminal activities often do so in order to aid or facilitate crime committed by male peers in their direct vicinity. Moreover, the large number of drug-related crimes involving an offender from Antillean origin also seems relevant. However, the above phenomena were not an adequate reason to explain the deviant age-crime curve for Antilleans, and it was thus not possible to give a satisfactory answer to the second question. This is probably so because the study came up against the limitations of the database used.

The explanation for the high rate of offenders among Moroccan teenagers compared to the *overall* percentage of offenders among Moroccans (question 3) may be found in the cultural dissonance of young Moroccans. Cultural dissonance is where migrants have to steer a middle course between two highly contrasting cultures, namely the culture of their country of origin (of their parents) and that of the country in which they are residing. The fact that second-generation Moroccans are comparatively more often registered as an offender than those of the first generation (after the figures were corrected for socio-economic circumstances) is an indication that cultural dissonance is a factor that plays a role among young Moroccans. Usually, cultural dissonance is seen more among the second generation than the first generation that socio-culturally mostly identifies itself with the country of origin.

Discussion

This study shows that we should question the almost exclusive focus on adolescents where fighting crime among Antilleans is concerned. As stated above, the fact that the Antillean community has comparatively many broken families may be an important cause for the high crime

rates among members of this ethnic group in their twenties, thirties and forties. The fact that there are many female single-parent families, the so-called matrifocal families, is widespread among blacks on the American continent. Despite the fact that this phenomenon is still subject to serious debate, most people agree that the matrifocal aspect is an adjustment to the poor or instable social situation that is also affected by the historical and cultural heritage. Therefore, policies will probably not have a large impact on the fact that matrifocal families are widespread among Antilleans. It probably makes more sense to develop policies that promote alternative forms of social embedding that increase the potential cost of crime for Antilleans in their twenties, thirties and forties. The main thing here is employment. Reducing unemployment among Antilleans therefore should not exclusively focus on young Antilleans. However, it is goes without saying that tackling school drop-outs among young Antilleans is also an important contributor towards fighting crime among post-adolescent Antilleans.

Crime among Moroccan teenagers is not half as persistent as among their Antillean peers. Where the Antillean crime rates remain high in their twenties and thirties, the rates show a steep decrease among Moroccans of the same age groups, which makes overrepresentation in the crime statistics compared to those of Dutch native heritage largely disappear. In due course, difficult Moroccan youth seem to land on their feet after all, as far as their deviant behaviour is concerned. However, this does not mean that the Dutch society will be rid of difficult Moroccan youth, as there is always the next generation. Hence, it is important to focus on the deviant behaviour of the teenage boys in order to tackle crime among Moroccans. In their teens, Moroccan youth are mostly facing problems that arise from cultural dissonance. The current issues regarding deviant behaviour of Moroccan boys is a reason for concern among many a person involved. Yet, there is enough reason for optimism in the medium-long term. The second generation of Moroccans with only one parent who has been born in Morocco, and the third generation of Moroccans will suffer significantly less from cultural dissonance than the present second generation of which the majority of parents have been both born in Morocco. Moroccan parents that grew up in the Netherlands are much better informed of the things that happen in Dutch society to which their children are exposed than the original migrant workers and their spouses.