

CANNABIS COFFEESHOPS, DRUG TOURISM, NUISANCE
AND ILLEGAL DEALING IN SOFT DRUGS, 2014

ENGLISH SUMMARY

Annemieke Benschop
Marije Wouters
Dirk J Korf

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Bonger Institute of Criminology

University of Amsterdam

www.bonger.nl

Research and Documentation Centre (WODC)

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This report documents ‘tourism’ connected to soft drugs and cannabis coffeeshops in the Netherlands in 2014, as well as soft drug-related public nuisance, illegal sales of cannabis to drug users outside of coffeeshop settings, and drug running. It also maps the geographical distribution of those phenomena. Marijuana cultivation was not investigated in this study.

We first obtained nationwide crime data in the form of police statistics on recorded incidents of *alcohol- or drug-related public nuisance* (Enforcement Database code E38) and of *possession* (F41) and *dealing of soft drugs* (F43), as well as on *soft drug offences* dealt with by the Public Prosecution Service (OM) under article 3 of the Expropriation Act (OW), with the exception of marijuana cultivation offences. In 2014, Dutch police recorded 24,807 such public nuisance incidents nationwide, or 14.7 per 10,000 population. Nationwide soft drug incidents totalled 5,663 (3.4 per 10,000) and soft drug offences recorded by the prosecution service came to 3,882 (2.3 per 10,000).

Such national-level figures conceal major geographical differences. We analysed the law enforcement statistics in more detail by taking a broad-based sample of 31 large, middle-sized and small ‘coffeeshop municipalities’ (local authorities that allow the sale of cannabis products in ‘coffeeshops’), dispersed over 11 judicial regions throughout the Netherlands. Wide variations emerged between regions as well as between local authorities, even after population was held constant. In the 31 sampled local authorities, the numbers of recorded incidents of nuisance per 10,000 population ranged from 2.7 to 140.5; police-recorded soft drug incidents varied from 0.9 to 13.2 and prosecution-recorded soft drug offences from 0.3 to 7.4 per 10,000 residents.

In those 31 communities we also conducted a total of 78 expert interviews with local informants – municipal and police officials that were knowledgeable about local soft drug markets. The interviews focused on local soft drug policies, measures and actions to enforce them, soft drug-related public nuisance, cannabis dealing in non-coffeeshop settings, drug running, soft drug tourism and coffeeshop tourism. The interviews were conducted independently of the statistical data, and the information obtained from the local experts helped us to supplement, refine and interpret the statistics. Most local authorities had no systematically recorded data of their own about drug-related tourism, nuisance or illegal trafficking, apart from the police data, but the local experts were normally able to give qualitative indications of the scale of those problems.

Overview of findings

The statistical law enforcement data we collected and the information obtained from local expert informants are schematically summarised in table 8.1. The symbol **+** (in bold in darkly shaded cells) indicates that police or prosecution figures were relatively high (50% or more above the national per capita average) or that local informants reported high-to-very-high coffeeshop or soft drug tourism, considerable-to-serious coffeeshop nuisance, or high-to-very-high numbers of drug runners and dealers. Non-shaded cells containing a minus sign, **-**, mean that figures were below average or that local informants reported little or no coffeeshop or soft drug tourism, coffeeshop nuisance, drug

running or dealing, as the case may be. The \pm symbol stands for moderate crime figures, moderate but not high numbers of coffeeshop or soft drug tourists, some public nuisance from coffeeshops or moderate numbers of drug runners or dealers. A question mark indicates a lack of clear findings.

Table 0.1 Summary of findings by local authorities sampled (2014)

Judicial district and size of local authorities		Recorded crime data			Data from local expert informants								
		nuisance incidents (police)	soft drug incidents (police)	soft drug offences (prosecution)	coffeeshop tourism	soft drug tourism	coffeeshop nuisance	drug runners	street dealers	mobile dealers	home-based dealers	pub or shop dealing	
Amsterdam	large	-	\pm	\pm	+	?	\pm	-	\pm	?	-	-	
The Hague	large	-	\pm	\pm	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	\pm	
	middle-sized	-	\pm	\pm	-	-	-	-	\pm	-	-	-	
	small	+	\pm	-	-	-	-	-	\pm	-	-	-	
Limburg	large*	+	\pm	+	-	+	\pm	+	+	+	+	?	
	middle-sized*	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	
	small	+	\pm	\pm	?	\pm	-	-	-	\pm	\pm	-	
Central Netherlands	large	\pm	\pm	-	\pm	-	\pm	-	-	-	-	-	
	middle-sized	-	\pm	\pm	-	-	-	-	-	-	?	\pm	
	small	\pm	-	\pm	-	-	-	-	-	?	-	?	
North Holland	large	\pm	\pm	-	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
	middle-sized	-	-	\pm	-	-	\pm	-	\pm	-	-	-	
	small	\pm	-	\pm	-	\pm	-	-	\pm	\pm	-	-	
Northern Netherlands	large	+	\pm	\pm	?	-	\pm	\pm	-	-	-	-	
	middle-sized	\pm	\pm	\pm	?	\pm	-	-	\pm	-	\pm	-	
	small	\pm	-	\pm	-	-	\pm	-	\pm	-	-	-	
East Brabant	large*	\pm	\pm	\pm	-	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	
	middle-sized*	\pm	\pm	\pm	-	\pm	\pm	-	\pm	\pm	\pm	-	
	small*	\pm	\pm	\pm	-	\pm	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Eastern Netherlands (border areas)	large	\pm	\pm	-	?	-	\pm	-	-	-	-	-	
	middle-sized	\pm	\pm	+	+	\pm	-	-	\pm	-	-	\pm	
	small	\pm	+	-	+	\pm	-	-	\pm	-	\pm	-	
Eastern Netherlands (non-border areas)	large	\pm	\pm	-	\pm	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
	middle-sized	\pm	\pm	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	\pm	-	
	small	\pm	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Rotterdam	large	\pm	\pm	\pm	-	-	-	?	-	-	-	-	
	middle-sized*	+	+	+	-	\pm	\pm	-	\pm	-	-	-	
	small	\pm	+	\pm	\pm	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Zeeland and West Brabant	large*	\pm	+	+	\pm	\pm	-	-	\pm	-	?	-	
	middle-sized*	\pm	+	+	-	\pm	-	+	\pm	-	-	\pm	
	small*	+	+	\pm	-	+	?	+	+	-	-	-	

* = non-residents barred from coffeeshops

For explanation of symbols, see above.

In a few local authorities, police or prosecutors recorded higher-than-average statistics that were not corroborated by the local informants. By and large, however, there was broad agreement between the statistical data and the expert information.

Although most of the local authorities we sampled had incorporated the residence requirement into their coffeeshop policies, it was not actively enforced in 22 of the 31. Places that actively prohibited coffeeshop access to non-residents were located predominantly in the southern border areas of the country.

Most of the local authorities sampled (18 out of 31) had low-to-average police-recorded nuisance and soft drug incidents as well as low-to-average prosecution-recorded soft drug offences over 2014. The interviewed local experts in most communities (19) reported little or no coffeeshop tourism (soft drug purchases in coffeeshops by non-residents of the Netherlands). Little-to-no soft drug tourism (soft drug purchases by non-residents elsewhere than in coffeeshops) was reported in just over half of the communities (16). Most communities (19) likewise reported little-to-no public nuisance from coffeeshops and half (16) reported few if any drug runners and drug dealers, or at most a small number of one type of dealer. Hence, large areas of the Netherlands were experiencing very little soft drug-related nuisance and illegal dealing in 2014.

In the sections to follow we specifically discuss the findings from our four research questions.

What developments were observable in 2014 in terms of the nature, scale and geographical distribution of coffeeshop tourism and soft drug tourism?

Geographically, no new developments in terms of coffeeshop or soft drug tourism were seen in 2014 in communities in the central, western and northern Netherlands (a large swathe of the country), because virtually no coffeeshop or soft drug tourists visited those communities. Most coffeeshop municipalities rarely attract visitors from abroad, or at least not the types that are interested in soft drugs. Amsterdam is an exception; it is heavily frequented by coffeeshop tourists. Since the closing down of some coffeeshops in the city centre, migration to surrounding neighbourhoods can be observed.

Outside Amsterdam, coffeeshop tourists in large numbers could be observed only in some local authorities in eastern border areas (which did not actively enforce a residency requirement). The larger border-area local authorities in the south of the country – which did refuse coffeeshop entry to non-residents – reported few if any *coffeeshop* tourists, or at least not any longer. They did, however, report many *soft drug* tourists. One small community in the province of Limburg, which suspended its active enforcement of its residence requirement in 2014, witnessed an increase in coffeeshop tourism, but no accompanying decrease in soft drug tourism, at least not yet. One large Limburg town saw a decrease in soft drug tourism as a result of its consistent enforcement of a strict residence requirement; foreign visitors were now avoiding it in favour of adjacent communities with less stringent enforcement. There was also evidence of drug trade relocating into border areas inside Belgium.

Migrant workers constituted a special category amongst the coffeeshop tourists. Some of them were living and working in coffeeshop municipalities, but were registered as residents elsewhere in the Netherlands (if at all). They therefore did not officially satisfy the residence requirements. Two local authorities that barred non-residents from coffeeshops made exceptions for migrant workers. Two others did not, resulting in a 'nasty' situation in the eyes of the local experts.

What developments were observable in 2014 in terms of the nature, scale and geographical distribution of soft drug-related nuisance?

By soft drug-related public nuisance we understand both nuisance from coffeeshops and nuisance from cannabis dealing at locations other than coffeeshops.

The majority of the communities sampled (19 of the 31) reported little or no *coffeeshop nuisance* in 2014. In places where it was reported, it consisted mainly of traffic or parking problems, mostly in narrow adjacent streets, and of loitering (often by youth aged 18 to 24) in already crowded neighbourhoods. Coffeeshop nuisance was reported predominantly in large or medium-sized local authorities throughout the country.

Some of the coffeeshop nuisance was attributed to local coffeeshop customers, but it was blamed equally on people who were not customers. In three communities studied, the moderate-to-serious nuisance was attributed explicitly not to the coffeeshops and their customers, but to drug runners and dealers that targeted tourists banned from the coffeeshops. In two of these towns, the local experts reported greater nuisance in 2014 than the previous year due to the removal of intensified police deployment; in the third town, nuisance continued to diminish in 2014, and a further decline was expected as a result of persistent enforcement efforts and intensified cross-border cooperation with Belgian police.

Coffeeshop nuisance due to nearby drug runners and dealers was reported exclusively in local authorities in southern border areas that enforced residency requirements. At the same time, not all places that barred coffeeshop access to non-residents reported such nuisance. In three such communities, little or no coffeeshop nuisance was reported at all. In two others, moderate coffeeshop nuisance was attributed to customers and non-customers who were local residents.

Indications concerning trends in *soft drug-related nuisance*, either in and near coffeeshops or elsewhere, may be inferred from the data on incidents of public nuisance recorded by police. By and large, the larger the local population, the higher the rate of recorded incidents, even after adjustment for population size. This was consistent with the picture relayed by local experts.

Soft drug-related nuisance was by no means evenly distributed across the Netherlands. In both regional and local terms, the southern border regions in Limburg and Zeeland–West Brabant reported disproportionately high per capita rates of police-recorded nuisance incidents, whilst neither the other southern border region of East Brabant nor the border-area communities in the eastern Netherlands reported above-average rates. Hence, if border-related problems did exist, they must have been linked to more factors than merely the proximity to Belgium or Germany. The large Limburg town we

studied stood out in particular. Approximately 140 nuisance incidents per 10,000 population were recorded there, nearly ten times the national average. Notably, though, the same town also showed a declining number of incidents over the course of 2014. That pattern was confirmed by the local experts, who reported that soft drug tourism and illegal soft drug dealing were both on the decline – shifting in some cases to surrounding areas (see also van der Torre et al., *Softdrugsbeleid in Maastricht: De Tweede Tussenbalans*. Apeldoorn: Politieacademie 2015). Be that as it may, the rate of nuisance in that city still remained higher than elsewhere.

A seasonal effect, lower in winter months and peaking in the summer, was evident in the numbers of police-recorded instances of nuisance at both national and regional levels, as well as in most of the separate local authorities. The local experts, however, mentioned such an effect in only one community, a small local authority in the region of Zeeland–West Brabant, where more soft drug tourism and illegal dealing involving foreign tourists was said to take place in the summer. There could be various reasons why the experts in other communities did not report seasonal effects. To begin with, a great many of the places studied experienced little or no drug tourism or illegal dealing anyway. Or a seasonal effect, if any, might have been regarded by informants as ‘normal’ and not worth mentioning. However, the seasonal effect observed in the statistics could have also been an artefact of how the data is recorded. Police-recorded incidents of public nuisance included not only soft drug-related nuisance, but also that related to alcohol and to other types of drugs. The exact proportion of incidents bearing no relation to soft drugs is not known, nor is it clear whether that proportion varies by season or by region. Such may also explain why higher-than-average figures or atypical statistical patterns were seen in a few isolated cases that could not be verified in information obtained from the expert interviews (which were conducted independently of the statistical data collection). The second, in-depth stage of our study will investigate more specifically the extent to which police statistics, and the trends they suggest, may be skewed by instances of nuisance that are not related to soft drugs.

Notwithstanding these minor qualifications, the law enforcement statistics were still largely consistent with the pictures painted by the local experts. The statistics therefore do give some indication, albeit an imprecise one, of trends and patterns in soft drug-related nuisance in 2014.

What developments were observable in 2014 in terms of the nature, scale and geographical distribution of illegal cannabis dealing to buyers outside coffeeshop settings?

Local experts were not always well informed about illegal soft drug trafficking in their communities. That could be an indication that the phenomenon was not much of an issue there, or that any related nuisance was negligible. In many communities there were few if any signs of illegal soft drug dealing, or there might be an unknown but small number of dealers operating there. If illegal soft drug selling did occur, it was usually carried out by *street dealers* (in 17 of the 31 local authorities in the sample). *Home-based dealers* (7), *mobile dealers* (6) and dealers operating in *shops, pubs or dance clubs* (6) were reported in fewer communities. No local sales of soft drugs via the Internet were observed.

Although illegal soft drug dealing was reported here and there throughout the country, all of the local authorities where large-to-very-large numbers of such dealers were reported, and also where different types of illegal dealers were operating, were located in the border regions in the south of the country.

In most places where illegal dealers were reported, they were targeting local residents (and, especially in smaller communities, street dealers often targeted under-18 users who were not allowed to patronise coffeeshops). Five local authorities in southern border regions formed an exception: street dealers there sold drugs to tourists who were refused service in coffeeshops. No direct connection between illegal soft drug dealing and the enforcement of a residency requirement could be established, however. Experts in four other communities that barred non-residents from coffeeshops either reported no substantial illegal soft drugs market or said that such dealers were targeting local residents. In two other communities, street dealers reportedly targeted tourists even though non-residents were welcome in coffeeshops. That could be a reason why relatively high numbers of police-reported soft drug incidents and prosecution-reported soft drug offences were seen in the local statistics in those two communities.

Apart from the decline in illegal dealing and its relocation to nearby areas as described above for a large Limburg town, few new developments in illegal soft drug dealing were reported by local experts in 2014. That was consistent with the impression deriving from the statistics: the numbers of police-recorded incidents of soft drug dealing or possession, as well as the numbers of soft drug offences recorded by public prosecutors, all remained more or less stable in the calendar year 2014.

What developments were observable in 2014 in terms of the nature, scale and geographical distribution of drug running?

In most of the local authorities in our sample (24 of 31), there was little or no evidence of drug runners involved in the soft drug trade. Experts in five communities did report high-to-very-high numbers of soft drug runners. Some may have also been street dealers, as those are not always easily distinguishable from drug runners (both approach potential buyers, but drug runners do not sell the drugs themselves). According to experts, drug runners and street dealers are often the same group of people, or at least they work together closely (in one place, mobile drug dealers were also said to be involved).

The five local authorities in question were the same ones discussed above in the southern border regions, where street dealers sold soft drugs to tourists who are banned from coffeeshops. In other words, the drug runner phenomenon was almost exclusively confined to the south of the country. As a rule, the drug runners were a few dozen local young men aged 18 to 24, but in one large town in Limburg they were an older group aged 25 to 34 hailing from urban areas in the west of the country. In all five of the communities where drug running was common, a *relocation* of the soft drug trade was reported as a consequence of the measures adopted there: that is, a relocation from in or near coffeeshops into surrounding residential areas, to niches of the city centre outside the focus of security cameras, to motorways outside of town, or to Belgium.

Conclusions

The statistical police and prosecution data we studied revealed wide geographical variations between the various Dutch judicial regions as well as between the local authorities in our sample. Although almost no additional local statistics were available to corroborate that data, our expert informants were able to provide qualitative indications of the local levels of nuisance, soft drug tourism and illegal dealing, thus helping us to refine and interpret the picture presented by the statistics. With only a few exceptions, there was broad agreement between the statistical law enforcement data and the evidence provided by the local experts.

As we review the police and prosecution data and the expert information, it becomes clear that it is predominantly the local authorities in the southern border areas that rank moderate to high in their levels of soft drug tourism, coffeeshop nuisance and illegal soft drug dealing. Although soft drug tourists may be spending their summer holidays in such communities, or may just be passing through, some of them are former coffeeshop tourists who keep coming back (though less often than previously), in defiance of the residency requirement imposed by some local authorities. The public nuisance arising from soft drug tourism and illegal soft drug dealing is most patently manifest in the Limburg region, followed by Zeeland–West Brabant; it is less evident in East Brabant.

Although the local authorities in question are ones that bar non-residents from coffeeshops, no causal connection between the nuisance and the coffeeshop bans can be demonstrated on the basis of the present study. Most of the other local authorities included in our sample – which scored low to average on the items we assessed and which did not exclude non-residents from coffeeshops – were not frequented by many foreign tourists at all. In five of the southern border-area communities that denied coffeeshop access to non-residents, drug runners and street dealers recruited tourists on the streets for soft drug purchases. No such phenomenon was reported, however, in four other communities that enforced residence requirements; any illegal soft drug dealing reported there was oriented to the local market. At the same time, local authorities in eastern border areas, which did not enforce residence requirements, did report illegal dealing targeted at soft drug tourists. Although they also had many coffeeshop tourists (causing little or no nuisance), experts pointed out that alternative illegal soft drug networks had already existed for a good while alongside the coffeeshops, enabling foreign users to buy quantities of soft drugs that exceed the Dutch maximum limit per purchase.

The combination of recorded crime data and expert information from local informants enabled us to create a more sophisticated overall view of geographical patterns in soft drug-related public nuisance and illegal dealing. The in-depth sequel to this study will focus more closely on the phenomena of coffeeshop tourism, soft drug tourism, soft drug-related nuisance and illegal dealing in soft drugs.