
City & Society

Policing Amsterdam's "Underworld"

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The first time I met Nordin he looked at me from top to bottom and said: "for which city department do you work for?" Surprised by the specific question, I explained to him and his friends, who stood around us, that I was a university lecturer, interested in the socio-economic conditions of the area in relation to international drug crime, and that, yes, I was conducting this study for the municipality of Amsterdam. A friend of his offered me a carton of orange juice, as he jammed an empty container in a trash can next to an outdoor bench. Nordin explained that they frequently saw city employees and researchers walking around, especially close to the Osdorper Ban, the main street running through [the Wildemanbuurt](#), a small neighborhood located in Amsterdam-West. Judging by my appearance – [White with a trimmed beard](#) – he figured I was one of them.

After meeting with several police officers and local policymakers as part of my ethnographic research, Nordin's question began to make even more sense. The abundance of researchers, social workers, and other city officials – many also White men with trimmed beards – from various departments in this predominantly non-White neighborhood was remarkable. Many business owners and residents with Turkish and Moroccan backgrounds had been extensively interviewed before, and sometimes provided me with the contact information of other researchers. It saved them the trouble of having to repeat their stories and experiences. One time I had just missed two anthropology students who were exploring basically the same topics – [drugs, crime, and belonging](#) – that the municipality had asked me to report on.

While generally known for being a [relatively safe capital](#), Amsterdam has several areas that are infamous for having a high-crime rate. Certain neighborhoods in particular are imagined as key urban spaces for the maintenance of a parallel, drug-based economy. When trying to explain the localized character of drug crime, municipality officials and researchers draw on socio-economic and geographical factors, remarking that housing conditions, for example, have deteriorated. In practice,

however, drug crime is often policed as a social and cultural problem. When trying to explain the localized character of drug crime, municipality officials and researchers differentiate between a Dutch “upperworld” and an “underworld”. Such imaginaries, however, do not only work to perpetuate popular racialized and classed imaginaries of social (dis)order and oversimplified understandings of crime. It also tends to justify more intrusive forms of policing and surveillance.

Imagining crime in the Wildemanbuurt

From the top floors of a high-rise building bordering the '40-'45 Plein square in Amsterdam-West, policymakers and social servants of the municipality overlook [the Wildemanbuurt](#). According to one employee of the city, those few blocks of houses and trees just south of the plein is a neighbourhood that “needs to be tamed”. Such analogies between the Moroccan-Dutch residents in the neighborhood and the idea of wild animals, living without rules in a lawless jungle, permeated everyday talk about The Wildemanbuurt. City managers encouraged me to start my research with a *buurtsafari* – a neighborhood safari or walking tour through the “urban jungle” with a local police officer – so that I could get a good sense of what the Wildemanbuurt was like, what kind of problems there were, and how police and local youth interacted in the everyday. During the tour, the police officer showed me [broken windows](#), empty houses, and trash, while younger residents walked away from us as soon as we approached them.

Perhaps coincidentally, the name the Wildemanbuurt in Dutch roughly translates to “the neighborhood of the wild man”, and is mostly a term used by policymakers and researchers. Local residents generally say they live in Osdorp, or simply Nieuw-West for that matter. The Wildemanbuurt is home to about 5,000 residents. In spite of its relatively small size, the area is notorious among police, social workers and the municipality “as one where urban problems aggregate”. Identified as a so-called “[ontwikkelbuurt](#)”, a Dutch term best translated as development neighborhood, it has a reputation of being generally deprived, rundown and crime-ridden. Due to the area’s “[stickiness](#)”, it has undergone intensive city interventions and served as empirical context for numerous research projects in recent years, which ranged from anthropology course assignments to extensive policy evaluations. According to census data and official reports commissioned by the

municipality, the area is mostly populated by residents with a migration background and a comparatively low socio-economic status.

Researchers and policymakers alike consider the so-called *hangjongeren*, a term that refers to – and stigmatizes – adolescent boys who gather in groups on the street, to be the neighborhood’s main problem. While the Moroccan-Dutch youth who grow up in lower-income neighborhoods such as the Wildemanbuurt are often targeted by a wide range of policing practices and social programs alike, the imaginaries and representations that circulate around these boys are contradictory. Hanging out in public spaces, such as corners, parks, and sidewalks in the middle of the day, they are often presented as the victims of their circumstances: they are seen as youth who come from broken homes, leave education early, have trouble finding a job, maybe even have a low IQ, which further adds to their stigmatization. In similarly dominant narratives, they are portrayed as easy prey for the “hardened” and “real” criminals [involved in large-scale organized crime and the drug trade](#). Attracted by fast money and status, these youngsters are imagined as easily swayed into doing small tasks, such as standing guard and picking up drug packages for more senior offenders.

Recognizing the precarious circumstances of youth in the Wildemanbuurt, policymakers and researchers have suggested that they get “sucked” into a downward spiral – either by the force of the pull and their inability to get out, or because they become “addicted to a luxurious lifestyle”, which leads them down a path of serious violent offences and even contract killings. Young boys that the municipality see as vulnerable to hardened criminals who are part of the Dutch achterkant or “underworld” became a key concern and “area of intervention”. In need of more “scientific evidence”, the municipality was eager to figure out how to prevent these children from becoming drug traffickers and murderers – how to make them choose a different path.

This is why local police officers often emphasize the need to show them that “crime doesn’t pay”, even though it often does. Police officers and city officials consider these problems to be characteristic of a geographical area. In this case, the Wildemanbuurt was labelled as a *zwijgwijk*, a term used to describe a neighborhoods where criminals force other residents to remain “silent”, to refrain from communicating with the local police. While residents were indeed reluctant to speak to the police at times, the reasons for this were multiple, and included beliefs that the police were unable to help them, or would only cause them more harm. The idea of a silent *zwijgwijk* failed to capture these local

realities, and, more importantly, was used by policymakers to justify a set of broader interventions that aimed to address organized crime, but targeted only specific neighborhoods and residents.

A social offensive against the underworld

Let me be clear: I have no intention of downplaying the seriousness of localized manifestations of violence. Recently, there was an attempt to [blow up two businesses owned by a local entrepreneur on the Osdorper Ban](#). The owner, who caught the perpetrators in the act, was shot in the arm. Only months before, he told me how he had frequently spoken out against adolescent boys hanging around, blocking the entrance to his shop, and was not scared of telling them off. Occurrences such as this are likely to have a profound impact on everyday life, potentially increasing tensions between local residents and city officials. In public debate, however, these examples are often linked to other forms of violence in Amsterdam, most notably [the killing of a lawyer in Amsterdam in 2019](#), and understood as a [problem of “the underworld”, which is seen as increasingly taking hold of “normal” city life](#).

Together with the call for more intrusive forms of policing, policymakers and city officials highlight the need for a “[social offensive](#)” to protect vulnerable groups and individuals. Notwithstanding this apparent socialization and decriminalization, this “offensive” is still a form of policing in which Dutch-Moroccan youth, such as Nordin, are targeted as key problems. While offering them an idealistic “way out” of drug crime, policing practices do not differentiate between who belongs to the “upperworld” and “underworld”: if you “hang out” on a corner in the Wildemanbuurt, you are seen as effectively contributing to what makes the Netherlands a [market-leader in international drug trade](#), and Amsterdam a capital city with a crucial role to play in this scenario.

While policymakers and researchers seem convinced that a “war on drugs” is counterproductive and harmful, the guise of a “social offensive” still allows for repressive practices and racialized policies to fit within a larger narrative to “help those at risk”. I suggest that combining “social” programs with repressive forms of policing – effectively fighting criminals and supporting those in need – might be a bureaucratic utopia. This combination of soft and hard policing sounds really nice, but in practice, local policing practices seem to conflate (inter)national violence and organized crime with specific dynamics of a city neighborhood. Problems of violence and drug trafficking, in other words, are seen as on a continuum with nuisance and waste issues caused by *hangjongeren*.

One of the current priorities for the police and policymakers is to better understand who is involved in drug trafficking, and who is doing what in which urban neighborhood. Since police officers themselves are not able to collect this information, allegedly due to budget cuts, so-called [straatcoaches](#) (street coaches) have stepped in. Officially working for a private foundation, these street coaches are active in several neighborhoods in Amsterdam, where they observe local residents – specifically those who they believe are, or are about to be, part of organized criminal networks.

In the Wildemanbuurt, I joined two street coaches who knew the name of every young resident we came across, if and how they were related, and if they had a criminal record. They had dubbed this practice of collecting personal information *namen en rugnummers* (names and player’s numbers) – in reference to the way sports commentators identify the moves of soccer players on the pitch. Witnessing several illegal and suspicious acts, however, neither these street coaches nor their managers really knew what to do with this information. Writing lengthy WhatsApp messages to himself, one street coach told me it was the most effective way of archiving his observations in case local police officers needed it for their investigations. Yet this access was often up for debate. While street coaches were not originally established to be part of policing practices, the need to differentiate between the “upperworld” – those who are *not* part of a “parallel” drug economy and could still be “saved” – and the “underworld” – those who have been lost to a criminal career – made their work meaningful for the policing of the Wildemanbuurt, especially in the eyes of the municipality.

A bureaucratic utopia

While expanding anti-crime policies with a “social offensive” might appear progressive and pragmatic on paper, local police practices and operations still target Moroccan-Dutch youth in the Wildemanbuurt as one problematic group. In their view, dealing with these groups and implementing policies aimed at particularly problematic individuals (such as the “top-600”, see figure 1) would reduce the creation of new “victims”. They believe that this would, at least temporarily, interfere with criminal authority and organizations in the neighborhood.



Figure 1. Poster at the municipality of Amsterdam. [Part of their “top-600” campaign](#), the text below translates to: “preventing little brothers and sisters from following the bad example”.

On the other hand, Nordin was proud to explain to me how Moroccan-Dutch youth responded to such policing strategies and targeting. When the police identified one of his friends as a suspect, and were about to make an arrest, Nordin and around fifty others shaved their heads, making it more difficult for the police to recognize and pick out Nordin’s friend from the others. Even the mayor of Amsterdam had heard about this story, and seemed to be aware of specific details, such as the small tunnel through which the youngsters fled from the police.

The mayor’s concern with this “escape” tunnel in the Wildemanbuurt is indicative of the municipality’s interest in acquiring more and more detailed information about the place and the people who live there. Within this context, “social” and preventive approaches to drug crime do not necessarily entail a change in the terms of everyday policing. Indeed, policing practices in places such

as the Wildemanbuurt are still heavy-handed and guided by dominant imaginaries of cultural otherness, [possession of weapons](#), and urban decay.

Recently, local police departments in various Dutch cities have begun giving lessons to primary school children. Making use of various exercises, including a “drug escape room”, these children are presented with the dangers of criminal organizations, their *modus operandi*, and most importantly, how to make the right choices and stay on the safe path. Such efforts represent crime and the drug economy as part of a parallel world – outside of the “normal”, “healthy” one. By centering the “underworld”, these narratives further legitimize its “taming”, which takes the shape of increasingly repressive policing practices against youngsters such as Nordin and other Moroccan-Dutch residents of the Wildemanbuurt. The question posed by Nordin, at the start of this piece, captures his awareness of the broader system that surveils him, and which labels him as either “vulnerable” or “criminal”. Either way, he’s a target.