

Summary

The prevalence of domestic violence and child maltreatment in the Netherlands

This report describes a prevalence study regarding domestic violence and child maltreatment in the Netherlands, and developments in these areas since the previous reports on domestic violence (Van der Veen & Bogaerts, 2010; Van Dijk et al., 2010; Van der Heijden & Van Gils, 2009) and on child maltreatment (Alink et al., 2011). The research comprised various studies and was conducted at the request of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport and the Ministry of Justice and Security by a number of research teams, and coordinated by the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC: *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum*). In addition to three preliminary studies,¹⁰⁵ the entire research comprised five empirical studies. Two studies focused primarily on estimating the extent of domestic violence among adults (Van Eijkern et al., 2018; Van der Heijden et al., 2019), two studies on estimating the extent of child maltreatment (Schellingerhout & Ramakers, 2017; Alink et al., 2018), while one was an in-depth investigation of individuals committing partner violence and child maltreatment (Woicik et al., 2018). This synthesis is strictly about the prevalence of domestic violence and child maltreatment. Comparability with the previous prevalence studies was kept as great as possible. In addition to the prevalence estimates, for the first time an investigation was conducted into the degree of co-occurrence in families of domestic violence and child maltreatment. Otherwise the study also focused more than previously on what being a victim of domestic violence entails for men and women, in particular concerning victims of partner and ex-partner violence. The report also provides an extensive description of the context in which domestic violence and child maltreatment occur, aided among others by what is referred to as an ecological model. The key question of this synthesis was as follows: *What is the nature and extent of domestic violence and child maltreatment in the Netherlands, which developments have taken place in this regard, and to what degree does co-occurrence exist of both types of violence in families?*

Violence between partners or ex-partners and other domestic violence

The estimates of the prevalence of domestic violence relate entirely to victims of physical and sexual violence¹⁰⁶ among the Dutch population aged 18 and older. Research reveals that over a five-year period, about one in 20 adults (5.5%) have experienced some incident involving physical and/or sexual violence in the home setting (Van Eijkern et al., 2018). This concerns 6.2% of women and 4.7% of men. In total, this involves some 747,000 individuals aged 18 and older. During the five-year period referred to, they have been a victim of at least one incident perpetrated by someone in the wider family circle, that is an intimate partner, ex-partner, other

¹⁰⁵ It concerns the reports by Snippe and colleagues (2016), De Vaan and colleagues (2016), and Ten Boom and Witkamp (2016).

¹⁰⁶ Where we refer to physical violence, this always concerns physical *non-sexual* violence. Sexual violence is considered in a separate category.

family members or relatives, or close family friends. In a third of such cases (34%), this involved a single incident. In 41% of cases, violent incidents took place a few times. Nearly 20% of victims have experienced *structural* physical and/or sexual domestic violence, meaning violence that occurs on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. This concerns some 97,000 women and about 27,000 men (Van Eijkern et al., 2018). We assume that the group of victims of structural domestic violence is *at least* this size, given that academic literature reveals that the victims of the most serious violence are most likely not to be reached with the questionnaire concerning this subject. Another indication that this is the case is the fact that Statistics Netherlands (CBS), which conducted some of the fieldwork for this prevalence study, has determined that among those who did not participate in this research (the non-respondents), there were more individuals who were registered with the police as victims of domestic violence than among those who did participate (Boonstra et al., 2018). Combined with knowledge from the literature that victims go to the police more often when the degree of violence experienced is greater, this is sufficient cause to believe that the aforementioned numbers for the group of victims of structural domestic violence are a conservative estimate.

Over half of domestic violence (56%) is violence perpetrated by an intimate partner or ex-partner. Some 4.0% of women and 2.0% of men aged 18 and older say that they have experienced this in the five years prior to the study. An estimated 76,000 women and some 13,000 men have been victim of *structural* violence inflicted by a partner or ex-partner. The reported partner or ex-partner violence usually concerns physical violence (72%), while the other cases concern sexual violence or a combination of physical and sexual violence. It is assumed that most of the partner violence measured here is situational in nature, meaning that the violence takes place in particular in the context of an escalating fight or fights. Using a very strict measure, in the study very few respondents reported on possible intimate terrorism (where one partner systematically dominates the other). This amounted to too little information to make any statements about the prevalence of intimate terrorism (Van Eijkern et al., 2018).

If we look at the difference between men and women as victims of all domestic violence, we see a prevalence of 6.2% for women and 4.7% for men. Greater differences between the sexes can be seen when the context and impact are included in the figures. Then it appears that women are more often victims of violence committed by their partner or ex-partner, and that men are more often victims than women of physical violence committed by 'family friends' (a very different type of relationship). It is also apparent that women have to deal with structural violence more often than men. For example, women are six times as often victims of structural violence committed by their partner or ex-partner as men are, and primarily women are injured in this regard (Van Eijkern et al., 2018).

Violence committed by partners or ex-partners comprises the vast majority of domestic violence involving adult victims. The remaining reported domestic violence, together over 40%, primarily concerns violence committed by siblings (13%), parents (11%) and 'family friends' (14%).

It is relevant to the presented estimates that a restricted research definition was used for domestic violence: only physical violence (including threats) and sexual violence were included. Serious psychological and 'economic' violence (e.g. social isolation and financial deprivation of partners) and serious harassment, including aided by modern technology, were not measured in this study. This is a limitation of this research.

Child maltreatment

The estimates of the prevalence of victims of child maltreatment refer to more types of violence than those regarding adult victims of violence committed by partners or ex-partners and other domestic violence. Among matters included in the definition of child maltreatment used in the Netherlands are witnessing domestic violence between parents and various types of child neglect. These have no equivalent in, for instance, violence between partners or ex-partners.

The self-report study held among secondary-school students (Schellingerhout & Ramakers, 2017) revealed that some 12% of the children aged 12-17 had dealt with child maltreatment in the past year in some form or other (10% of boys and 15% of girls). This concerned physical abuse and threats of being beaten by parents/care-takers, witnessing physical confrontations between parents and sexual abuse –in the latter case this can also involve perpetrators from outside the family. Previous research has shown that the prevalence of child maltreatment decreases the older a child gets. Therefore there is no reason to believe that the proportion of children that have experienced child maltreatment would be lower among younger children than among secondary-school students.

In addition to the secondary-school student study, a sentinel study was also conducted. This provides an impression of all of the children aged 0-17 who have had to deal with child maltreatment (Alink et al., 2018). Due to the design of the study, which deals with child maltreatment that has been identified by professionals, the assumption is made that the child maltreatment measured in it is more structural and/or more serious in nature than the abuse which is self-reported by adolescents in the secondary-school student study. A group estimated to be between 90,000 and 127,000 children have to deal with at least one type of child maltreatment on an annual basis, some 3% of all children aged 0-17. In addition to physical and emotional abuse, this also includes such issues as serious neglect, which even turns out to be the largest group. Girls and boys are victims of child maltreatment in nearly equal measure, with the exception of sexual abuse and emotional abuse. In the latter cases, girls are significantly more often victims.

The majority of children reported by informants in the sentinel study were abused by a biological parent (96%). The abuse may have been committed by a single parent or by both of them. Mothers are more often perpetrators than fathers (86% and 62% respectively, with cases also existing where both parents are abusers). However, the researchers did point out that more children live with only their mother than children live with only their father. In 6% of cases the abuse was committed by a step-parent or foster parent, whether or not alongside another abuser. Sexual abuse is committed relatively often by male perpetrators who are not the biological father, stepfather or foster father (Alink et al., 2018).

About one third of the 12% of secondary-school students who reported abuse, state themselves that they have been victim of multiple forms of child maltreatment (Schellingerhout & Ramakers, 2017). The sentinel study reveals that nearly 30% of the children dealt with more than one form of child maltreatment (Alink et al., 2018). So both studies show that about one third of the children are victims of multiple forms of abuse.

Finally, it is relevant to note that the prevalence estimate of 12% based on the secondary-school student study does *not* include neglect, and only includes emotional abuse to a very *limited* extent. In the estimate based on the sentinel study, neglect and emotional abuse were measured. In this context, it is important to emphasise once again that the term 'child maltreatment' (and this is the case internationally too) does not only stand for active abuse such as serious physical violence, but also for emotional abuse (e.g. the structural rejection of a child), as

well as *abstaining* from certain behaviour (i.e. physically and emotionally neglecting a child). This can also cause damage to a child.

The co-occurrence of domestic violence and child maltreatment in families

This prevalence study was the first to investigate the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child maltreatment in Dutch families on a major scale. An initial estimate is that on an annual basis 2.5% of the secondary-school students aged 12–17 experience abuse in their family which is targeted against the child and physical violence between the parents (Schellingerhout & Ramakers, 2017). This estimate involves both families where there was a single incident between the parents and between the parent(s) and child, as well as families where serious violence between various family members is a regular occurrence (and all else in between). This initial estimate is a rather general one given that what was understood as child maltreatment and violence between parents was limited. Emotional abuse and neglect by parents (forms of child maltreatment that occur often), as well as violence between parents that the secondary-school student is unaware of, were not included.

If we look at the group of children aged 0-17 based on the sentinel study who have been relatively seriously and/or structurally abused (including neglect), depending on the type of child maltreatment, some 28% (belonging to the group of victims of sexual abuse) to 65% (belonging to the group of victims of emotional abuse) also experience other types of domestic violence in their family. The co-occurrence percentages for the other forms of child maltreatment lie somewhere in between these two figures. Other forms of domestic violence primarily concern violence between parents (Alink et al., 2018).

These findings are in line with those found in international research into co-occurrence: in studies involving all children (or all families with children), co-occurrence of violence between parents and abuse of at least one child generally is under 10% on an annual basis, and sometimes well below this. The percentage of partner violence on an annual basis found in international studies in families where child maltreatment occurs is often between 20% and 60% (Ten Boom & Witkamp, 2016).

Development over time

Domestic violence and child maltreatment are phenomena which are difficult to measure, something that is even more the case for the development of the extent over time. The research groups that conducted the central studies took great pains to replicate the studies conducted nearly a decade ago, in order to provide insight into development over time. However, in interpreting the findings, a few caveats are in order. It can be stated with certainty that *no* evidence was found for an increase in the prevalence of domestic violence and child maltreatment: none of the data sources pointed in that direction.

In order to compare the prevalence of domestic violence in 2017 as well as possible with the prevalence as reported in 2010, based on the current operationalisation of domestic violence,¹⁰⁷ recalculations were made by Van Eijkern and colleagues (2018) involving the data from the previous measurement. The prevalence of domestic violence among adults measured in 2017 was lower than the prevalence measured in 2008 by Van Dijk and colleagues (2010). Since the measurements are not entirely comparable with regard to the sampling, it is impossible to say with cer-

¹⁰⁷ Physical violence (including threats) and sexual violence.

tainty what the degree is to which the observed decline does indeed reflect a real drop in domestic violence. Unfortunately, the second and independent method of estimating domestic violence (capture-recapture method; Van der Heijden et al., 2019) yielded results which raise too many questions, so these prevalence estimates were not used. As a result it is not possible to create a timeline based on a non-survey method in order to confirm or refute the decline in domestic violence found in the self-report study. Both studies on child maltreatment come to the conclusion, albeit with some reservations, that compared to previous measurements there is no difference in the number of abused children on an annual basis. It could thus be concluded that the prevalence is stable, since the studies do not unequivocally show a significant drop.

However, there are a few indications in both self-report studies (Van Eijkern et al., 2018; Schellingerhout & Ramakers, 2017) that a decline has been developing in recent years. The self-report study among adults reveals that the drop in the percentage of victims of domestic violence is relatively largest for young adults aged 18-25 (although this group remains the largest in absolute numbers). Otherwise, the secondary-school student study shows that the number of victims of child maltreatment aged 12-17 does show a significant decrease in the estimates related to the number of children that ever has had to deal with child maltreatment. The estimates also show a significant decrease on an annual basis if slightly lower reliability is not an issue. We therefore would not like to rule out that in reality a downward trend has started regarding the prevalence of domestic violence and child maltreatment, which has first come to light among the youngest age groups in the population. A possible decline in victimhood among the younger generations could also in part be the result of a social environment in which tolerance for violence in the private sphere has been decreasing for years –as is also reflected in the literature study conducted for this research –a social environment where these days perhaps indeed less violence is perpetrated. However, only the future can reveal whether there is indeed a downward trend.

In conclusion

The final chapter of this synthesis contains a detailed reflection, in which topics are covered such as the changing definitions of domestic violence and child maltreatment, and the importance of gender-sensitive research. A number of suggestions are also made for future research. One of the important conclusions is that the current prevalence studies are required to meet too many competing wishes and requirements. Therefore the recommendations include monitoring these phenomena more frequently in basic fashion using updated measurement instruments, and disconnecting this from more in-depth research into specific groups or types of domestic violence and child maltreatment.

It is impossible to comment on the effect of policies based on periodic national prevalence estimates. If domestic violence declines, this does not necessarily mean that the policy in place has been successful, while the opposite is also true: an increase should not lead to the conclusion that the policy does not work. This requires specific research in the form of policy evaluation. However, it should be viewed as positive that no increase in domestic violence and child maltreatment has been found in prevalence studies in the past decade –a decade in which these issues relatively received a great deal of attention.

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