The war on antisocial behaviour rationeles underlying antisocial behaviour policies : comparing British and Dutch discourse analyses

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5 Down these mean streets. Tackling antisocial behaviour: local Dutch support?▪

1 Addressing antisocial behaviour in Dutch urban areas

Public bus drivers who refuse to travel through certain residential, urban areas, terrified of misconduct by young immigrants, or people who are forced to move out of public housing after being frequently threatened by yobs. Incidents like these dominate Dutch headlines. Media reports in the Netherlands paint a notably grim picture of urban neighbourhoods in which social life is threatened and street life is impossible. Residents of these areas are quoted as fearful, desperate and calling for repressive government actions (Koemans, 2010). Their views on this kind of antisocial behaviour also referred to as 'street terror', is often used by politicians as a justification for tougher crime policies. In this article, we will analyse this public discourse on ASB in order to be able to figure out the extent of local support for these new policies. To what extent do residents of inner city areas demand a tough approach towards antisocial behaviour on the street?

According to the influential urban planning guru Jane Jacobs, a neighbourhood's social safety depends on its street life (Jacobs, 1961). Because of the incidents mentioned above, this behaviour, which is often dubbed antisocial behaviour, appears to be a pressing concern in the Netherlands. This applies even more since the government puts more energy trying to influence subjective safety or feelings of safety rather than focusing solely on enhancing 'objective safety' or decreasing registered crime as such. As criminological research shows, it is not only the actual crime rate that determines subjective safety, other signs of disorder like graffiti or intimidating yobs are often more influential (Markowitz, 2001; Vanderveen, 2004).

In addition, more than in other countries, the problem of antisocial behaviour in the street (henceforth also ASB) in the Netherlands is blamed openly on immigrants and their offspring. Over the last years tensions arose, resulting from the persistent weak socioeconomic position of certain (ethnic) groups combined with public concern with the feasibility of the prevailing tolerant approach to immigration (Pakes, 2004; Engbersen, 2007). Due to the fact that ethnic minorities are far from distributed evenly across space, tensions manifest

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themselves earlier and more intensely in specific urban areas than elsewhere in the Netherlands. Many of these urban neighbourhoods contain a relatively high share of low-income families including ethnic minorities and are also plagued by disorder and crime as well as by feelings of unsafety. Already in 1995 the Social and Cultural Planning Bureau concluded that the mere presence of ethnic minority groups in areas increased feelings of unsafety among the traditional neighbourhood residents and gave them the impression that the neighbourhood was deteriorating (SCP, 1995; Uitermark, 2003). Tapping into these fears, politicians claim that 'street terror', which has become a common term, has grown out of hand in deprived areas and effectively call for more repression.

There is very little evidence, however, to support the claims that (a) the situation with respect to ASB has gone out of hand and (b) that the call for repression is dominant amongst local inhabitants. The regular quantitative surveys among the public cannot fill this gap, as we will demonstrate below. Research in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods which includes perceptions on policies of inhabitants and local key figures has so far been very limited.

The role of chief actors in the national and local political domain, like politicians and policymakers, who are responsible for promoting tougher ASB policies in the Netherlands has already been analysed elsewhere (Koemans, 2008, 2010a). Yet, more detailed insight into the situation on the ground is severely lacking and we aim at making an attempt to fill this void. On the basis of a series of intensive qualitative case studies in eleven problem areas in the four largest Dutch cities, this paper seeks to contribute to the knowledge of (and perceptions on) ASB and the degree of support for repressive measures to tackle it within the neighbourhoods concerned.

The qualitative study reported here is part of a broader research project in which the shift towards repression in the field of ASB (a form of sub crime) is studied in the context of recent criminological debates on shifting crime policies. In different terms, influential criminological theories, notably those of Garland (2001), Young (2003) and Simon (2007) all point to a marked rise of more repressive and controlling policies towards deviant behaviour, crime and sub crime. Therefore Koemans (2009, 2010a) investigated the policy level, political and media discourses and makes a comparison to the UK. Here we zoom in on the public discourse, because views of the public are often used as a justification for crime policies but are rarely studied.

After briefly discussing definitions of ASB, we will discuss recent policy developments and the rationales behind the policy transfer of the British Anti Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) to the Dutch context (section 2). With a summary of the scholarly debate, we will conclude that there are gaps and discrepancies in the debate on ASB (section 3). In section 4, the research questions and methods will be discussed. Thereafter, the results and conclusion will be presented (section 5 and 6).

1.1 Defining ASB on the street

Antisocial behaviour is not a Dutch invention, but a cause of concern across nations (cf. Burney, 2005; Hörnqvist, 2004). According to British law, ASB is defined as "acting in a manner that caused or was likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more persons not of the same household as [the defendant]"(Home Office, 2003 p. 14).[1] In the United States it is defined as "a cluster of related behaviours, including disobedience, aggression, temper tantrums, lying, stealing, and violence" (Eddy & Reid, 2002 p. 20). In the Netherlands, the term ASB is relatively new and is imported from the UK. It is primarily linked to disorderly behaviour on the street and 'problem accumulation areas' within cities. The Dutch authorities do not provide a definition, but describe ASB as "behaviour systematically severely impacting on the wellbeing, and which is specifically targeted at specific persons" (Kamerstukken, 2007). Examples given in the policy memorandum, however, do not confirm the latter. Hanging around and littering which are common complaints, are in most cases not targeted at persons in particular. In 2000, the European Commission (2000, p. 4) concluded that 'antisocial conduct is conduct that without being a criminal offence can by its cumulative effect generate a climate of tension and insecurity'. In this article we adopt the latter definition, because it discerns between crime and antisocial conduct, although, in practice, those dividing lines are less clear (see paragraph 2).[2] We note that in many discussions, vague boundaries are drawn between crime and antisocial behaviour if they are drawn at all.

2 THE REGULATORY CONTEXT

For decades, Dutch politicians turned a blind eye towards the (perceived) problems of disorder or ASB. This tied in with the traditionally strong social-character of crime policies. The Netherlands has often been characterised as a liberal and tolerant society, with an emphasis on pragmatic compromising and practices of *gedogen*, also dubbed regulated tolerance or condoning (Buruma, 2007). In 1985, a governmental committee explicitly advised the Dutch cabinet not to address nuisance or disorder in the public domain with criminal law, in order to avoid over-criminalisation and escalation.

Times have changed, however. In recent years. there has been a resurgence of interest in neighbourhood disorder as well in social sciences as in public debates (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). Although street terror as a pheno-

1 This is the most widely used definition form the Crime and Disorder Act (1998). New Labour in the UK introduced ASBOs under the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act and these were enforced in 1999.

2 For a more thorough discussion see Koemans (2009, 2010).

menon and a term are, in fact, not that new as nowadays is assumed, it is equally true that during the last decade society has perceived this kind of behaviour as a more serious and pressing problem than before (Pakes, 2004; van Swaaningen, 2005; Tonry, 2004; Garland, 2001; Devroe, 2008). The media discourse is also changing, as a quick glance into the national newspapers demonstrates. In 2009, eight times more newspaper articles were published in the Netherlands on ASB compared to 1998. In line with the general increase in (openly) anti-immigration sentiments among the Dutch public, these articles more often explicitly connected ASB to young immigrants (with a 35% increase).

2.1 Urban policy

The policy turnaround is most evident in the encompassing urban renewal strategy in 40 problem neighbourhoods, known as the *40 districts approach.* The Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment compiled a list on the basis of indicators of severe social problems (VROM, 2008). In order to turn around the deprived urban areas into more liveable areas, over a thousand million euros have been invested in urban policies which are geared towards these 40 problem districts. The urban policy programs are legitimised on the basis of a *regeneration policy rationale* (social and economic regeneration of local areas can reduce ASB) converged with the *Quality of life* (ASB should be tackled because it is a serious problem that makes people miserable and fearful) and the *Broken windows rationale (*ASB should be tackled because if left unattended, it leads to serious crime) (Koemans, 2010). First reports with respect to outcomes of this new program demonstrate mixed effects. Social investments like supporting residents' associations and community parties and community barbeques showed no measurable results. On the other hand physical measures such as regeneration projects (cleaning the streets, installing new street furniture) and building of new privately owned homes and putting social rent properties on sale did decrease the reported ASB in the areas The most recent evaluation also has a positive tone. The level of trust among inhabitants has risen because of the improvements they observe and ASB has again decreased (Marlet, Poort & van Woerkens, 2009).

2.2 Criminalisation

Simultaneously with these local urban policies, ASB has been criminalized at a national level. Criminalising not only in the sense of penalizing behaviour but of also labelling behaviour as criminal. Inspired by British initiatives, the Dutch government of Prime Minister Rutte is preparing to enact new administrative legislation that provides local authorities with more legal instruments (often called administrative sanctions) to react to and prevent ASB. For example,

extending the term of a restraining order from three months to two years (as is the case with ASBOs).

Earlier in 2010 a new law has been enacted; titled *Severe anti-social behaviour* which in many ways is similar to the British Anti-Social behaviour Order (ASBO).[3] The ASBO is a *civil* order. Restraints of certain behaviour are imposed by a civil court and breaching is a criminal offence (Ashworth, 2004). It is a multi step prohibition, a civil order backed up by a criminal penalty. As Millie (2008) pointed out, within a relatively short period of time, the ASBO became popular and is now part of the common lexicon.

Although the British ASBO was new in the sense of multi step prohibition, in the Netherlands this construction already existed. In the Netherlands, mayors have more power in this respect than their British counterparts. According to current law, they can also issue restraining orders, but with the new law they can prolong this period and couple it to a duty to report.

The introduction of stronger measures is coupled with war rhetoric and a repressive stance (Koemans & van der Leun, 2010). Several recent debates in Dutch parliament on ASB produced quotes such as; 'Send the army', 'tough actions needed against street terror', and 'anti-social behaviour wreaks serious havoc in many Dutch cities'.[4]

Although recent publications (Nixon, 2010) show that British policies are currently shifting away from an enforcement-focused approach to policies with a more communitarian approach, Dutch measures in this field are often legitimised on the basis of (a) their perceived success in the UK and (b) the fact that people in deprived areas want the government to act. The latest measures are evidently meant to sooth the sense of anxiety felt by the public (CCV, 2010). For many Dutch politicians, it is self-evident that national and local government should act firm against forms of ASB because it is a pressing issue (Pakes, 2005; van Stokkom, 2007; van Swaaningen, 2008).

3 Discourses and discrepancies in the debate on ASB

It is difficult to support or contradict the claims made by Dutch politicians who called for ASBO-inspired policies. Surveys with respect to disorder clearly do not paint a picture of increasing street terror or street wars. Between 2001 and 2005, the number of registered complaints about public nuisance even decreased, and since then it remained more or less stable (CBS, 2010; SCP, 2009). Reported problems mainly concern dog dirt, litter on the streets, vandalism

3 Others are, the 'minor nuisance at municipal level act') and 'the public prosecution service settlement act' (Devroe, 2008).

4 Debates, after incidents of ASB in the city of Gouda lead to widespread public outcry see for quotes national newpapers *Algemeen Dagblad, De Telegraaf, NRC Handelsblad*; 25th of September 2008).

and graffiti rather than bullying or intimidating behaviour by youngster on the streets.

In a recent municipal-level survey (Gemeentelijke Belevingsmonitor, 2009), these outcomes were confirmed, with the exception of traffic nuisance being a top priority. It is well known that people's perception of the level of ASB varies by gender, area and age, with people most likely to perceive high levels of ASB in areas of greatest social deprivation. Indeed, people in cities report higher levels of nuisance than those outside cities and people in deprived neighbourhoods report higher levels than those in more well to do urban areas; 71 percent, as opposed to 55 percent (CBS, 2010). Although the largest differences in reported experiences concern littering and vandalism and not street terror or related issues. The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), a government agency which conducts research into the social aspects of all areas of government policy, asks citizens specific questions about social nuisance. These surveys show a decline in the reporting of social nuisance between 2002 and 2006, in particular in derived neighbourhoods (SCP, 2009). So in sum: available data are ambiguous, but rather contradict than support the claims of politicians in this field with respect to rising street terror.

3.1 Explaining discrepancies

Several scholars agree that 'statistically unfounded' feelings of unsafety among the public and politicians alike can be accounted for by the general malaise in society and a lowered tolerance threshold (Terpstra, 2010; Boutellier, 2002, 2010). The government acts less tolerant towards ASB because actions to tackle this behaviour are demanded by the public (Koemans, 2010a). Although statistics and survey outcomes as mentioned above, show a decline since 2001 in both social disorder and crime, people became less tolerant and, therefore, demand more action. Rising expectations and risk avoidance are in the centre of these explanations (Pieterman, 2009). It cannot be denied that although these trends have often been observed, a certain level of circular reasoning seems to be present. The government acts less liberal towards ASB because actions to address this behaviour are demanded by the public, while at the same time statistics show a decline which has already started ten years ago. Still, because people became less tolerant, they appear to demand more action.

Moreover, certain elements are missing from the debate. Even though, in discussions about issues of disorder and ASB, issues of immigration and integration come to the fore quickly, these issues are not touched upon in most surveys. So it might as well be that worries about immigration and failed integration play a bigger role than worries about disorder or antisocial behaviour in general. Yet, also with respect to opinions on migration and integration, surveys do not clearly confirm the concerns which are often taken to be omnipresent. Even in a time with strong support for Wilder's anti-immigration

party (who received 20% of the national votes in 2010), in surveys with respect to international migration, the population is highly divided (Sopemi, 2010) and not overly negative.

It cannot be denied that the problems with ASB and integration are hot political topics and receive massive media attention. What exactly is going on the ground, in the relevant inner-city areas is difficult to decipher. As Garland (2004) argues, studies of local discourses are crucial for theory building because small-scale studies can find evidence of structural patterns. By studying the construction of the phenomenon in detail, variation and complexity of the studied problem become more visible. So, in order to analyse how people in the so-called problem neighbourhoods talk about and construct views on ABS, a discourse analyses is the most suitable method.

There are more reasons for studying the different discourses *more* thoroughly. Garland (2004) argues that the level of influence of the media and political debate on the policy developments is high. This argument and Garland's basic assumption in his influential *Culture of control* (2001) that 'high crime rates becoming a social fact', are difficult to judge on an empirical level. Therefore first, the discourses on street-level are analysed. Then attention will be given to the consequences at a theoretical level. The above-mentioned discrepancies and blind spots already indicate that Dutch scholarship on this subject is constrained by data availability and reliability. This concerns in particular the absence of direct observation of disorder in the relevant neighbourhoods and the difficulties of reaching certain parts of the population. In large surveys, the non-response within deprived neighbourhoods is usually high and selective (Stoop, 2005). Moreover, Taylor (2001) has argued, that in areas with high levels of actual disorder and crime, there is a higher threshold to be crossed before disorder is perceived as a problem, which can also influence survey data (van Noije & Wittebrood, 2009). In many ways, those urban areas appearing at the top of the list of a good quality of life bear little relation to those at the bottom in terms of demographic make-up, levels of local deprivation, size, and local infrastructure which makes survey outcomes hard to interpret (cf. Ipsos Mori, 2010).

Thirdly, worries about migration, integration and related issues which may influence survey outcomes are usually more implicit than explicit. In sum, it is very well possible that population surveys on disorder do not picture how ASB is perceived in different neighbourhoods. In response to these limitations, we have taken on the suggestion made by British scholars Donoghue (2008) and Jacobson (2008) argued that further research is required to establish the ways in which individuals, communities, housing practitioners and other professionals are experiencing ASB. According to them, local accounts of ASB should be fundamentally concerned with understanding and explaining individuals and communities lived daily experiences and realities. In particular in the Dutch case, it seems to be critical to conduct this research in deprived

urban neighbourhoods. These areas have the highest degree of immigrant population and are designated problem areas.

4 Research questions and research approach

4.1 Research questions

In line with the observations above, we aim at making two contributions in this paper. We have conducted extensive research directly in the context of disadvantaged neighbourhoods, with an emphasis on a low threshold with informal interviewing in the streets. Firstly, these primary and rich data enable us to answer the questions: how do local inhabitants and key informants perceive the problems in their neighbourhoods? To what extent do they observe different forms of ASB? A sub question is also to which social groups respondents link ASB, is it mainly to (certain groups of) immigrants? How does this compare to survey outcomes and to claims made by politicians, in particular with respect to street terror? Drawing on earlier local studies on feelings of unsafety conducted by Elffers and De Jong (2005) we can expect local issues to influence opinions of inhabitants of urban neighbourhoods. In some neighbourhoods, these concerns relate to a local drug scene, in others to youth hanging around, or to communication barriers between autochthonous inhabitants and inhabitants with a migrant background. If, however, in disadvantaged areas street terror is indeed the pressing issue that national politicians claim it is, this will be disclosed through our research strategy.

Our second contribution will be to attempt to respond to recent discussions about the call for repression. Politicians time and again claim to step in for 'ordinary people' in deprived areas who call for repression. Questions which so far are left unanswered are: to what extent are stronger measures indeed called for by the public and if so by whom and in reaction to which societal processes? How do residents and key figures perceive present measures and who do they hold responsible?

4.2 Research Approach

We have selected eleven research sites in the four largest cities (Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam and The Hague) from the official list of earlier discussed *40 districts approach.* By way of quota sampling we have explicitly included some neighbourhoods which have caught most of the negative media attention and some who did not. We have focused on the largest cities because they play a prominent role in the political and media debates. The areas can be seen as extreme cases where a concentration of ASB problems is expected to be found. Interviews with social workers, policemen, troublemakers themselves

and residents of eleven so-called problem neighbourhoods in four major Dutch cities were conducted and analysed, as explained in more detail below.

We aimed at collecting rich data on the (local) public discourse. In line with Hajer (2006), a discourse is defined as an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorisations through which meaning is allocated to a social phenomenon. A discourse analysis can, therefore, be considered a research tool, providing insight to a confusing situation or development. Of course, it would be wrong to assume the existence of a single and omnipotent discourse (Uitermark & Gielen, 2010). Our goal is not to describe just one debate, but to investigate the different views. A discourse analysis is the appropriate method to figure out the complex construction of ASB on the street. The results can reveal to which extent a certain policy includes people views.

When conducting a discourse analysis subjectivity is a concern, since the method often requires one researcher to pass judgments on possible motivations and interpretations (Coffey, 1996). In this paper we partly resolved this issue by working with 55 Master students of Criminology who assisted us with the research and with whom we discussed the findings.

While analysing discourses, it matters not only what actors say but also how and where they say it. Actors in the public discourse in this article are field experts, social workers, residents, local businessman, government personnel (local policemen, school teachers, street wardens) and offenders with hands-on local knowledge. These actors were approached in the selected neighbourhoods through:

- Semi-structured interviews with individuals concerned with ASB in the selected areas.
- Informal interviews with inhabitants, often held in the streets.

Observations took place during different moments of the day, night and week in neighbourhoods. Under supervisions of the authors, the student- researchers conducted the observations and interviews over a period of three consecutive autumn months in 2008. The fieldwork resulted in 48 expert interviews, 257 interviews with local retailers and members of the public and 32 interviews with offenders (337 in total). Furthermore, researchers carried out observations in all selected neighbourhoods during ten weeks with a minimum of two times per week at different hours. Observations lasted between one and four hours, including weekends and nights, resulting in an estimated 500 hours of observations. Students were free in deciding where to go and what threads to follow. Although this may have resulted in a certain bias, an open approach is crucial in exploratory research. With this study we do not adhere to statistical notions of representativeness. Criticism has been levelled at 'convenience surveys' for their lack of representativeness and not without reason (Couper, 2000). The present study is an exploratory one, which aims at counterbalancing serious problems in the form of selective non-response in sample surveys of population frames (Stoop, 2005), which are otherwise less recognised. Therefore, a certain

extent of potential subjectivity is accepted as a trade-off for in depth knowledge.

Another drawback with the chosen research strategy could be that especially people who are the most fearful, seldom leave the house and are, therefore, difficult to reach. To overcome this selectivity we decided on various research locations, for instance shops, playgrounds, community centres and public transport shelters. We specifically instructed students to put energy into contacting hard-to reach categories of respondents.

Because of the relatively young population in the selected neighbourhoods, deploying students, – in many cases female students –, appeared to be an advantage in the research project. Most students were not familiar with the neighbourhoods concerned. They were aware that they had to act street wise and avoid dangerous situations. They usually went in pairs or small groups, but they were also stimulated to be open minded and use every opportunity to make contact. They often felt uneasy at the beginning of the research and they were widely noticed as not belonging in the selected neighbourhoods on the basis of their appearances. In most cases, they were quickly able to overcome barriers, especially when they had made clear that they were not journalists looking for sensational stories. A group of researchers experienced intimidation on the streets when were subjected to verbal abuse and physical threats by angry youngsters, but in the end gained trust. In one instance, another group decided to refrain from conducting a neighbourhood survey as a result of threats. Many students noticed that they had been looked up through Hyves or other social networks. Several students used the social media as well in order to contact respondents which they could not contact otherwise.

5 Results: the local public discourse

In general, researchers noticed neighbourhoods which paid little resemblance to their expectations based on media coverage. The environment in these 'mean streets' looked far better than usually depicted and street life seemed lively in many places. Numerous people in the streets expressed their satisfaction with their living environment. When speaking to them about the fact that their neighbourhood was a designated 'problem area' people often seemed a bit surprised. One woman suddenly understood why her parents and some friends did not want to park their car in her area.

A woman who lived with her family in one of the most infamous parts of Rotterdam said: "When I stroll through the area, I know all the neighbours, they know me, I stay around a while, speak to people, yes. You know; every city has its positive and negative sides."

Many respondents do not ignore the problems, but simultaneously stress the liveliness and heterogeneity of their environment, what they appreciate. Respondent: "I like it that there is some noise; I do not want to live in a quiet

area." In a way, these respondents seem proud to be coping in a situation that others look down upon. Some respondents are more complacent: "I fear I have to stay here till I meet my end. Not really something to look forward to but it can always be worse." It must be noted, however, that many respondents take steps to adapt their daily routine through fear of antisocial behaviour or crime, for instance by avoiding certain streets or not going out at night or even during day times. Being street wise is considered both normal and necessary.

One aspect, which was observed, by researchers in many cases, was a domination of men and boys – often with an immigrant background – in public spaces and a high degree of group formation in the streets. Not only during the night, but also during daytime, men seemed to dominate public spaces. Although this was not something the research was actively aimed at, this gendered public space was persistently noticed by the research assistants and appeared to be an underestimated but potentially defining aspect of living in the selected neighbourhoods. Another recurrent and less anticipated theme was the media attention, or rather media obsession with antisocial behaviour in the neighbourhoods concerned. Respondents continuously mentioned this phenomenon which was a finding in line with earlier results from Elffers and De Jong (2005). These two researchers asked youngsters in problematic urban areas their response to this unwanted media attention and they were told that some of them had started to ask for money when being interviewed.

In this study many respondents did not seem to have a clue about how they could use the media attention in simple ways that would benefit them more. They responded rather cynically to questions about attempting to use the media to express their own opinions. The media are predominantly seen as looking for sensation and reinforcing the negative stereotypes of the neighbourhoods.

5.1 Discourses on ASB

During all conversations we tried to find out how local inhabitants and key informants perceive (potential) problems in their neighbourhoods, and to what extent they observe and experience different forms of ASB. It is known to be a highly confusing concept and experiences of people will be combined with what they have heard from others, what they have seen, heard or read through the media, as well as with their more general outlook on life. When spontaneously providing examples of different forms of ASB, respondents listed a wide variety of behaviours such as hanging around, abusive language, pestering the elderly, junkies, vandalism, graffiti, road rage, loud noise, trashing windows, intimidating behaviour, cursing, car thefts, shoplifting and setting fire to cars. Evidently, experiences differ widely. Respondents all had ideas about it, and a first observation is that many of them mentioned criminal as

well as sub-criminal behaviour under the same heading. A resident replied; "ASB? Once in a while a window is broken, and some houses are burglarised. But the biggest problem is the yobs hanging around."

Others focused on criminal behaviour. "Just now, before you came, a foreign boy hit a police man in the face. Their was a fight with the police. This looked really sensational. Last week the same incident occurred. Those things happen every week." Another respondent added; "A few months ago they drove through the neighbour's front window and took the TV." In sum, there is no clear distinction made between crime and ASB, but people living in more deprived areas seem to associate the term ASB with more extreme forms of behaviour, such as intimidation, abusive behaviour, and violence.

5.2 Street terror?

Although we explicitly selected areas where problems were expected to be highly pressing, respondents in eight (out of eleven) neighbourhoods did not spontaneously mention street terror or related terms and issues in their accounts. Only in three neighbourhoods ASB strongly dominated the conversation. In these areas respondents warned researchers and urged them to be careful. An older woman related ASB to fear of victimisation: "At night you should not walk here all alone, gal!" In one instance researchers were guided by the police when going through certain streets, and occasionally they felt threatened by groups of young people. In several cases, people referred to the fear of intimidation or repercussions, which has stopped them from reporting antisocial behaviour and others have experienced intimidation or threats in the past.

So, although we selected eleven extreme cases, street terror was only seen as a pressing issue in a minority of the studied areas. For many local respondents, ASB in the sense of street terror was not an issue to be at the forefront of their concerns. On the other hand, in three neighbourhoods there are reports of problems that severely affect the quality of life.

In these three areas, inhabitants and key figures for instance reported a struggle for power between rowdy youths and the police which echo concerns about street terror. A school headmaster: "By way of reprisal they set fire to cars, terrorised people and wrecked parks. The residents are really afraid and keep quietly to themselves. The youngsters are no longer confronted with their acts. Even a local police man said: "Fear reigns and the boys are in control". Residents tell how they learned to stay silent. "The community does not speak out. There are a few troublemakers, my son had a row with them, but if you interfere, your windscreen will be broken the next day (...). And then the next time you will keep quiet." Many respondents talked about these situations in a resigned manner. They seemed to accept the situation, to some extent, as normal or at least unavoidable. Yet, they also referred to the fact that

problems like these have their own dynamics and after a while the problems will shift to another place, or another issue will come to the fore.

5.3 Identifying trouble makers

The interviews and conversations highlighted how people associate the term ASB with a range of factors, including wider cultural and societal issues (such as lack of respect and education, moral decline and lack of community spirit), as well as with particular types of individuals, cultures and perpetrators, often focussing on young people as trouble makers. Interviewees generally touch upon the issue of small children who are not properly raised and not sufficiently supervised. For example: "According to me, the main problem is people having too many children. They cannot control them. The children get bored and misbehave. They cause distress. Sometimes I feel: the younger children, worse the problems. I was spat in the face by a ten-year old boy, for no reason."

A second recurrent theme is youngsters hanging around in groups in public spaces. In more than half of the neighbourhoods, immigrants are said to be the main problem makers with the emphasis on Morrocan youngsters. "The boys hanging around are not waiting for the tram. (…) Especially the Moroccans I find scary. They are shouting."

In three areas with many Moroccan teen-agers, their behaviour is considered normal juvenile behaviour and the streets are believed to be safe. A man who lived in his ethnic, diverse neighbourhood for 25 years said: "People think it is dangerous here (…) but that is not true." On the other hand, many respondents were young people from all backgrounds, who felt wrongly accused. They agree that they spend a lot of time in the streets, and they complain about feeling bored. They feel disconnected from the rest of the residents and like to defy the police. According to different youngsters the police react aggressively at the slightest provocation. A Moroccan social worker describes it as follows: "Especially the younger policemen, well, they really act like they are in the army, like they are at the Gaza strip or so."

Summarizing the local discourse on ASB, we can conclude that the assumed state of street war was not depicted by the majority of the inhabitants and key figures, although some policemen act like they are working in such a condition. In three out of eleven neighbourhoods, discourses do echo concerns on street terror, in the other eight to a much lesser extent. In most cases, problems with youngsters played a dominant role. In half of the neighbourhoods, including those with the strongest complains, problems are associated primarily with Moroccan youth.

6 RESULTS: LOCAL SUPPORT FOR TOUGHER MEASURES?

Apart from studying perceptions, the next research question was how respondents expect the government to react. A first observation is that awareness of existing measures to tackle ASB tends to be high, with many respondents mentioning that so much is done already. They bring up CCTV (closed-circuit television) and more police supervision and often stress that there is enough government interference. Many of them also mention improvements which they have experienced themselves. A local inhabitant states; 'In the past there were troubles yeah, and that bad reputation stuck, but that is not correct anymore.' Our findings are in contrast with English research done by Ipsos Mori (2010) where awareness of measures to tackle ASB tends to be low, with most survey respondents (59%) saying they do not feel informed about what is being done to tackle ASB in their area. This rises to 64% among those who think ASB is a problem in their local area.

Overwhelmingly, the English survey respondents believe that it is the police who are (solely or jointly) responsible for dealing with ASB (90% of the respondents mentioned this), with the local council coming a distant second (36%). After the police and the local council, it is felt to be the responsibility of families, local communities and individuals themselves to deal with ASB.

In the Dutch study at issue here, respondents see a less dominant role for the police. This is not the same as a lack of support for repressive policies or strict policing. For example, there is some sense among respondents that, in practice, the police and municipal agencies pay more attention to administration than to prompt responses to antisocial behaviour in the area. In the public's eye, the police do not always command enough respect in daily encounters. On the other hand respondents also mention effective police measures and refer to crucial intermediaries between the public and the authorities, such as street coaches: "Street coaches are the eyes and ears of a neighbourhood. When late at night there are small children on the street, a street coach escorts them back home, to their parents."

Although the police and other agencies are seen as being (partially) responsible for successful reactions, many interviewees also point to parental responsibilities. A local school teacher: "So many things go wrong because of bad parenting. Parents are often not even interested. It is not difficult to predict that their child will take the wrong path."

Even though, some social workers address the issue of nature as opposing nurture ('It is all about character and predisposition to ASB'), the majority agrees that focusing on welfare provisions and social measures, like preventing truancy, are more effective than repressive measures. As one respondent explained: "More police interference can lead to more stigmatisation of youngsters, especially those of Moroccan descent."

In two areas, respondents mentioned explicitly that social cohesion was low, and that it should be improved to counter ASB. A local teenager expressed

this idea as: "When I do not know the guys on the street I am afraid, but if I know at least one of them, then it is okay."

Of all categories of respondents, retailers favour repressive measures the most, but they also stress the effectiveness of already existing instruments like dispersal powers and in some cases doubt if more instruments are needed.

7 Conclusions

Given our selection of extreme cases of deprived urban neighbourhoods, and given the intensity of the research it is remarkable that only in a minority of the research sites respondents see severe antisocial behaviour as a pressing problem. Other than we expected, only in three out of the eleven neighbourhoods we came across more persistent stories of intimidation and threats that seem to be in line with the much more general claims made by politicians.

Reviewing the eleven research sites we must conclude that findings and experiences in the selected neighbourhoods were highly diverse and in many cases, far less dramatic than frequently described. Taking into account the nuanced picture that arises from the observations and interviews, both formal and informal, we can conclude that – contrary to what we expected – we did not unveil a major hidden issue. The popular image of deprived urban areas that resemble war zones in which the streets are terrorised by groups of immigrants has not been corroborated. This is not the same as denying certain problems, as observed in three out of eleven research sites, but, which were to a much lesser extent also recognised elsewhere. A certain level of acceptation of social problems and disorder that would not be accepted in more well-to-do areas has also been noticed, in line with earlier findings. Furthermore the feelings towards ethnic minority youngsters as the main perpetrators of ASB are mixed. Some inhabitants blame them for the troubles others downplay their role and warn for the danger of stigmatisation.

Secondly, we looked at local support for repression. When summarizing the highly diverse accounts of respondents in our research, the attraction of repressive measures was considerably lower than expected. Although there was a certain level of support for ASBO-inspired laws and regulations, in particular, with retailers and shop owners, the attraction appears far greater for national politicians than for most people locally concerned. Surprisingly, many residents were well aware of existing policies and many claimed to have witnessed improvements rather than deterioration over the years prior to our research. In contrast to British findings (Ipsos Mori, 2010) where the English public overwhelmingly points to the police as the institution to deal with antisocial behaviour, many of the Dutch respondents framed solutions in general welfare state terms and terms of family responsibilities. Educational support and community centres were often stressed and street coaches acting as intermediaries between the police and communities were highly praised.

The view that things already turned in the right direction as a result of intensive policy making was not an exception. We can even hypothesise that going further down the road of ASBO-style repression and intensifying the role of the police, might threaten or even erase these feelings of collective responsibility. In the UK, there is a growing awareness of this counter-effect of the ASBO even to the point that in July 2010, Home Secretary Theresa May announced her intention to reform or even abolish the ASBO in favour of alternative 'community-based' social control policies (*BBC*, 29 July 2010).

Although we started our search with the intention to shed light on the discrepancies between the available quantitative data – which does not show an increase in ASB- and the public debate which paints a grim picture, we came across another pressing discrepancy. Our research disclosed a wide gap between the cluster of media/political debate on the one hand, and community experiences on the other. If we would use our study as an indicator for the public discourse and public demands within the neighbourhoods concerned, we can conclude that the public voice is often represented in a highly biased and incomplete way. Many national as well as some local politicians claim that 'something must be done', without knowing against 'what' or 'who' the actions should be taken according to whom. Without having clear ideas about what 'something' amounts to, the debate becomes highly dependent on media representations and stereotypes.

Many inhabitants see their neighbourhoods problems being used both for political gain and for the search for sensationalism by the media and the public. Symbolic policies, which treat immigrants and street youths in a harsh way, are thought to appeal to autochthonous voters (cf. Body Gendrot, 2000). When politicians respond primarily to sensational media representations, a spiralling dynamic of media-attention and politicians tapping into that will not help to solve the actual problems in these neighbourhoods. We found that many local agencies and actors are far from happy with these developments and point to their downside. They favour a combination of several strategies over a one-sided tough approach. This shows that next to differences between countries, which are often recognized in the literature, differences between policy levels (in this case national versus local) can also be salient. These unexpected outcomes call for even more in-depth knowledge of local experiences and perceptions. This information will help improve the effectiveness of government and public agencies in maintaining social order in disadvantaged urban areas. Not only to supplement traditional quantitative surveys but also to counterbalance skewed media representations and to include local policy experiences.