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Children Rough Sleepers: Netherlands Literature Review

1. WHO ARE 'CHILDREN ROUGH SLEEPERS' IN THE NETHERLANDS?

Although in The Netherlands the term 'street children' ('straatkinderen' in Dutch) is widely known and used, it usually refers to such children living in other, mostly developing countries. It is hardly applied, and especially not by professionals/stakeholders, for homeless children in The Netherlands itself. The term 'children rough sleepers' (which would roughly translate into Dutch as 'kinderen die moeten slapen in zware omstandigheden'), does not exist at all. This may be partly due to the widely reported phenomenon that most homeless children and youth in The Netherlands actually do not sleep that "rough". Very few really sleep on the street, on benches in parks, door alleys, and so forth; the majority can stay overnight under a roof (which does not mean to imply that they necessarily sleep in particularly nice places!).

The term most used and officially recognized in The Netherlands is *zwerfjongeren* (which translates into English as 'wandering youth'). In 2010 the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports² introduced a definition on *zwerfjongeren*, which is now applied by all stakeholders. It reads: '*Wandering youth are **actually or residentially roofless**³ people under **23 years** of age, with **multiple problems***'.

With 'residentially roofless' it is meant young people who don't have their own place to live, and who are enlisted on their own (so without parents) with an agency for social shelter/reception/relief (like pensions for the homeless, night shelters). These kinds of agencies are considered not to offer a stable living environment. There are other residential settings that (are considered to) offer a stable living environment, examples of these are: 'supported living' (living on your own, or in a house with other youth, with support from social services', 'Foyers de Jeunesse', 'Rooms with Chances', 'Youth-care facilities', 'Women Shelters', 'Mental Health Care facilities' and facilities for 'Protected Living'. Children and young people living in these kinds of facilities are not considered 'zwerfjongeren'.

With 'multiple problems' in the above definition it is meant that being either actual or residentially roofless and under 23 of years age in itself is not enough to qualify as *zwerfjongere*. To fall under that definition **multiple problems** need to manifest themselves like: addictions, psychological or other health problems, difficulties finding a job, problems with the law, and so forth. Interestingly enough, it is up to professionals to decide if one can speak of multiple problems in a certain case. It

² Zwerfjongeren in Nederland, een heldere definitie. Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport. Februari 2011. Available via <http://www.invoeringwmo.nl/bibliotheek/brochure-zwerfjongeren-nederland-een-heldere-definitie>

³ In the Netherlands there is a distinction between 'roofless' ('without a roof above the head', dakloos) and 'homeless' (thuisloos). This distinction is, however, –in practice– not always very clear.



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even says that for a young person to be categorized as *zwerfjongere* “the suspicion of existing multiple problems by a professional is enough”.

It is worth mentioning that the *zwerfjongeren* are part of a broader category of roofless people (‘daklozen’ in Dutch). At the same time the category of homeless youth (‘thuisloze jongeren’ in Dutch) includes also ‘couch hoppers’, who do not have their own living address, but who do sleep under a roof each night – with friends or family members or in sleeping facilities of crisis shelters⁴. And there is also a category of children who live with their families in social shelter facilities; there are such families in a number of major municipalities in the Netherlands⁵.

2. THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

Some numbers

It is difficult to gauge exactly the extent of this problem since in The Netherlands municipalities have been using different definitions and different methods of collecting data. Recently more uniformity is arising.

According to an official estimate from July 2011 there are around **9000** *zwerfjongeren* in The Netherlands. Because it is difficult to reliably calculate the number of *zwerfjongeren*, it is generally believed that the real number is higher.⁶ And, again, these numbers exclude the so called homeless youth, whose number is unknown⁷.

Further info:

- 61% of *zwerfjongeren* is male and 39% is female.
- Most *zwerfjongeren* are between 18 and 23 years of age (70% fall within this age category).
- The percentage of *zwerfjongeren* of non-Dutch descent differs per research. Estimates are between 35% to 53% (in The Netherlands somebody is considered of foreign descent if at least one of the parents was not born in The Netherlands).
- Between 35 and 65% has followed only primary education⁸.

Due to the methods in which information is collected, analyzed and extrapolated, there is also a tendency to underestimate the number of *zwerfjongeren* under 18. Anyway, all involved deem the real numbers to be higher, because it is assumed that many *zwerfjongeren* are not known by support services. A safe assumption seems to be that the real number of *zwerfjongeren* under 18 is higher than **1000**.

⁴ Veelgestelde Vragen, Stichting Zwerfjongeren Nederland, www.zwerfjongeren.nl

⁵ Kamerbrief over beleid maatschappelijke opvang zwerfjongeren, M.J. van Rijn, staatssecretaris van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport (letter from the State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport to the Dutch parliament, 16 January 2013)

⁶ Telling Zwerfjongeren. Aantallen op basis van definities 2010. Authors: K. Brummelhuis, L.Drouven. Bureau HHM. Enschede, 2011. Source: <http://zwerfnet.nl/2013/01/28/beeld-van-de-opvang-feiten-en-cijfers-2011/>
www.zwerfnet.nl

⁷ Source: Veelgestelde Vragen, Stichting Zwerfjongeren Nederland, www.zwerfjongeren.nl

⁸ Source: Veelgestelde Vragen, Stichting Zwerfjongeren Nederland, www.zwerfjongeren.nl



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Some Trends

Various sources -ranging from newspaper articles to academic publications – indicate that there is a clear trend of rising numbers of *zwerfjongeren* in the last decade. This upward trend is even more notable given that the definition has been narrowed down in 2010. Social changes such as ‘hardening of the society’ and the increasing severity of the kinds of problems faced by youngsters at risk, are considered among some of the reasons for the rising numbers.

Other notable tendencies are that up to 80 % of the residential *zwerfjongeren* –according to some estimates- have been served in the past by the child protection system (youth care or ‘jeugdzorg’ in Dutch) and that they are getting younger, as estimated by interviewed experts. The group of *zwerfjongeren* with psychological and psychiatric problems is also considered to be on the increase, as well as the number of pregnant homeless girls. About half of the *zwerfjongeren* are said to come from broken families and two-thirds are using (at least) soft-drugs⁹.

Risk Factors

Research conducted within the project Combating Social Exclusion among Young Homeless People (CSEYHP)¹⁰, outlined unhealthy family situations and the lack of stable, safe space to live as the main risks leading to homelessness. Institutional factors and (the types) of social provisions by the state play a role only later – at the stage of intervention, support and re-integration¹¹.

Fransen¹² and Van Bergen¹³ also list a number of factors that lead or contribute to homelessness such as:

- Rearing issues and relations with the parents (broken homes, intensive conflicts, lost trust, foster care, out-of-home placements, etc).
- Composition/characteristics of the family (absent father, (too) young mother, alcohol/substance abuse by the family, low educational level of the parents, regular change of living places, divorce, etc).
- School and friends (experience of being bullied, truancy, bad academic record, dropping out of school and negative peer pressure).
- Individual factors (traumatic experiences, PTSD, depression, psychosis, drug dependence).

The predominant risk factors are child abuse and neglect and growing up in an environment different from the biological family (e.g. foster care, residential care). The age per se is not a risk factor but it could have a contributing role; e.g. the age 15-17 is seen as particularly risky.

⁹ Brummelhuis, K. Drouven, L. (2011) Telling Zwerfjongeren. Aantallen op basis van definities 2010 Bureau HHM. Enschede

¹⁰ A comparative Report on Youth Homelessness and Social Exclusion in the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Portugal and the UK. A preliminary study for the European research project ‘Combating Social Exclusion among Young Homeless People (CSEYHP)’, Date 27th July 2009. Available at <http://www.movisie.com/cyh>

¹¹ <http://www.opvang.nl/site/item/resultaten-europees-onderzoek-zwerfjongeren-bekend>

¹² Fransen N. e. a. (2011) Zwerfjongeren in beeld. Literatuurstudie naar kennisontwikkeling over zwerfjongeren, available at <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten-en-publicaties/rapporten/2011/07/06/zwerfjongeren-in-beeld-literatuurstudie-naar-kennisontwikkeling-over-zwerfjongeren.html>

¹³ Bergen A. van e.a. (2010) *Zorg voor sociaal kwetsbaren*. Themarapport volksgezondheidsmonitor Utrecht 2010. GGGD Utrecht.



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Other sources (Jeeninga¹⁴, Berg-Le Clercq¹⁵, Bijvoets¹⁶, Noom¹⁷) all make an important point, namely that becoming a rough sleeper is a *process* rather than a one-off act and that it takes time to reach this point. The issues that play a role might be:

- Social-provision factors (e.g. lack of affordable living space)
- Social- economic factors (low educational level, unemployment, low SES, integration issues for youngsters from non-Dutch ethnic backgrounds)
- Social- environment factors (dysfunctional families, conflicts in school, (negative) experiences with child protection services).
- Individual factors (different kinds of behavioral problems, low self-esteem, (light) mental disability, addictions, psychiatric problems).

It is emphasized by these authors that homelessness is a *multi-problem phenomenon*, a result of the buildup of a number of factors, in a variety of possible combinations; on their own none of the listed factors need to lead to homelessness. A 'non-conformity factor' might be of importance too: some young people choose to confront the social norms and values.

3. CURRENT POLICIES AND EXISTING SUPPORT STRATEGIES FOR ZWERFJONGEREN

In recent years, Family and Youth Centres (CJG; 'Centra voor Jeugd en Gezin' in Dutch) are being/have been established in urban and local areas, under the control of municipalities within which local care and advice teams from all statutory agencies (police, education, youth care and social work) make needs assessments and guide 'youth at risk' into different paths and also refer to the Youth Care Agency. It is intended that all agencies will share a common risk assessment and a common electronic children's dossier¹⁸.

Decentralization is a policy trend in the Netherlands and the ongoing shifting of responsibilities from the provinces to the municipalities when it comes to child protection is a good example of this.

The support system for *zwerfjongeren* is also decentralized, with 43 focal municipalities (so called 'centrumgemeenten') taking the lead. The central administration body responsible for *zwerfjongeren* is the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS); it does not have a special department for *zwerfjongeren*, but several of its focus areas are relevant. The ministries of Education, and Justice play also a role when it comes to *zwerfjongeren*. According to the Act on Social Support (Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning) every municipality is responsible to offer

¹⁴ Jeeninga, W. (2010) Zwerfjongeren omvang, kenmerken en zorgbehoefte. Universiteit van Tilburg

¹⁵ Berg-Le Clercq T, van Dijk M, van Griensven R, Kornalijnslijper N. (2007) Aanpak Zwerfjongeren problematiek. Handreiking voor gemeenten. Den Haag: SGBO

¹⁶ Bijvoets M. Zwerfjongeren in Den Haag. (2006) Een onderzoek naar de profielen van zwerfjongeren en de hulpverlening gezien vanuit profielen. Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht

¹⁷ Noom M, Roorda-Honee J, Heyendaal P. (2003) Thuisloosheid bij jongeren en volwassenen. Houten: Bohn Stafleu Van Loghum.

¹⁸ A comparative Report on Youth Homelessness and Social Exclusion in the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Portugal and the UK. A preliminary study for the European research project 'Combating Social Exclusion among Young Homeless People (CSEYHP)', Date 27th July 2009. Available at <http://www.movisie.com/cyh>



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support for its citizens. This includes also provisions for homeless people such as social shelters and other measures. However, there are notable differences between the municipalities. In a recent communication to the parliament the State Secretary of the Ministry of VWS pointed out that the information provision and the services are improving in general but there are still problems and risks such as the ongoing trend of budget cuts¹⁹.

A specific problem with the support to young rough sleepers is the lack of coherence. The care for *zwerfjongeren* is arranged according to different rules and regulations. A number of different agencies are involved but the coordination and collaboration is usually not very effective²⁰. This increases the risks for children and young people with problems: it is safe to assume that a number of them become or prolong their existence as *zwerfjongeren* as a result of ineffective coordination of services.

The state secretary mentions also the following specific challenges:

- there are waiting lists;
- the time to process the request for (financial) support is too long;
- aftercare: better coordination is needed between the different administrations/services and simplification of the regulations²¹.

It is also recognized that the lack of available housing and suitable forms of education and work opportunities hinders the social re-integration of *zwerfjongeren*.

The lack of coherence is furthermore seen when it comes to the financial provisions for the support services. There are three legislative acts (one of them setting two distinctive regimes) that regulate the financial aspects of the support provided by different agencies/organizations:

- According to the Act on Social Support (Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning, WMO): all municipalities are responsible for preventive youth policies (for example: prevention, signaling and dealing with child rearing and child development problems);
- WMO also defines the regime for the abovementioned focal municipalities (centrum gemeenten) and their offering of social shelter/support services;
- The Codified Act on Special Care (Algemene Wet Bijzondere Zorg; AWBZ, or rather translated as Special Health Care Act) among other things regulates the work of the so called Zorgkantoor (Care Office) which is responsible for identifying young people with a disability.
- The Youth Care Act (Wet op de Jeugdzorg) is the main legislation in the field of child protection; it regulates the services for children up to 18. Until now all aspects of child protection (usually referred in the Netherlands as 'youth care') were responsibilities of the provinces; now each individual municipality becomes responsible for the child protection services of its citizens.

¹⁹ Kamerbrief over beleid maatschappelijke opvang zwerfjongeren, M.J. van Rijn, staatssecretaris van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport (letter from the State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport to the Dutch parliament, 16 January 2013

²⁰ Veelgestelde Vragen, Stichting Zwerfjongeren Nederland, www.zwerfjongeren.nl

²¹ Kamerbrief over beleid maatschappelijke opvang zwerfjongeren, M.J. van Rijn, staatssecretaris van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport (letter from the State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport to the Dutch parliament, 16 January 2013



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The transition from the child protection services to services supporting young people with multiple problems is apparently a major issue. As already mentioned, according to some estimates up to 80 % of the residential *zwerfjongeren* have been served previously by the child protection system; this together with the trend that *zwerfjongeren* are getting younger requires intensified involvement of the child protection services. The recent communication to the Parliament specifically mentions a possible extension of Child Protection (jeugdzorg) provisions up to the age of 23 for *zwerfjongeren* in those cases where this would be relevant.

The above suggests that the government seems to be willing to follow some of the major recommendations that came out of CSEYHP project. These recommendations were:

- To make binding agreements between different actors on what to do when there is school drop-out and/or problems in the home situation.
- Make clear procedures for how to support and follow up when a young person leaves an institution (especially when they become 18 and no longer fall under the Youth Care Act).
- Create sufficient housing capacity for young people.
- Create extra attention for a perspective on education and work²².

Prevention is definitely the preferred strategy that is indicated in the letter from the State Secretary to the Parliament. Also prevention of returning back to homelessness for *ex-zwerfjongeren* is emphasized. Good transition arrangements and follow up (after-care) services (should) serve this end. Prevention is seen important also in the context of striving to keep children away from shelters (for adults). This happens when children stay in shelters with their parents (especially with their mothers). The government finds it necessary to invest in developing methodology specially targeting children of homeless families in shelters²³.

It is recognized that the existing strategies need improvement. The support and services for the *zwerfjongeren* are a local responsibility: all municipalities have to work on prevention and reintegration and the 43 focal municipalities (centrumgemeenten) offer specialized services/shelters. At the same time the municipalities are not able to address challenges such as the insufficient coordination, the difficult transition for the young people (aged 18) from the system of child protection to other social services, and the lack of coherence in the regulations.

Organizations/agencies supporting zwerfjongeren

The organization most clearly representing and advocating nationally the case of Dutch children rough sleepers is Stichting Zwerfjongeren Nederland²⁴.

As already explained social services and support is provided on the local level. In most municipalities there are Social Services that offer some form of support. There are also social shelters

²²

http://www.movisie.nl/sites/default/files/alfresco_files/Aanbevelingen%20voor%20het%20lokaal%20zwerfjongerenbeleid%20-%20Leren%20van%20Groot-Brittannie.pdf

²³ Kamerbrief over beleid maatschappelijke opvang zwerfjongeren, M.J. van Rijn, staatssecretaris van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport (letter from the State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport to the Dutch parliament, 16 January 2013

²⁴ www.zwerfjongeren.nl



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(‘Maatschappelijke Opvang’ in Dutch), in most municipalities; there *zwerfjongeren* may find a temporary place to sleep and get some other support. The latter can be NGOs operating just on the local level, or local branches of nationwide operating NGOs (for example: Salvation Army, Humanitas). The bulk of the financial support for these kinds of services usually comes from the municipality. It is very clear that the number of spaces for *zwerfjongeren* in the shelters is not sufficient to cover the needs²⁵.

4. AWARENESS RAISING ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN

There seems to be no national, government or NGO lead or initiated activities specifically aimed at preventing or raising awareness on the topic of homelessness or *young rough sleepers* amongst school aged children or the general public.



The only ongoing activity since 2009 (at least that we are aware of) that could be considered as specifically awareness raising related to *zwerfjongeren* is the ‘bag’ campaign lead by Stichting Zwerfjongeren Nederland; this is a low intensity campaign, with seemingly little impact. It has to be noted that this appears to be not so much an activity aimed at preventing other young people from becoming *zwerfjongeren*, but more an activity to create awareness on and support for existing *zwerfjongeren*²⁶.

5. MAIN CONCLUSIONS FROM LITERATURE REVIEW

The number of *zwerfjongeren* in the Netherlands can be only roughly approximated at around 9000 under the age of 23 years. Of these probably around 1000 are under 18. Most experts expect that these figures are in reality higher because many *zwerfjongeren* are not known by support services.

In all likelihood very few of the Dutch *zwerfjongeren* regularly sleep really rough - on the street. Most either spend the night in some kind of support facility, or with friends or family. Most of them are boys (70%). Young people with a foreign background number between one third to half. There are some worrisome trends in the last decade: the number of *zwerfjongeren* is on the rise, there are more pregnant girls amongst them, and the group of *zwerfjongeren* under 18 is increasing.

²⁵ Telling Zwerfjongeren. Aantallen op basis van definities 2010. Enschede, 2011.

²⁶ <http://www.tassencampagne.nl/>



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Important risk factors for becoming a *zwerfjongere* are unhealthy family situations and lack of stable, safe spaces to live; but it is understood that it is always a combination of multiple factors that leads to rough sleeping.

Policies to address the issue are fragmented and their implementation is decentralised. It is broadly recognised that the existing strategies need improvement. Increasing the coherence and coordination between different agencies and organizations is seen as a priority by the current government.