

# The social impact of Covid-19 in the Netherlands. An explorative study

**Nadja Jungmann**

Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands

**Jean Pierre Wilken**

Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands

**CORRESPONDENCE:**

*Jean Pierre Wilken*

e-mail: jean-pierre.wilken@hu.nl

## *Abstract*

*This article reports on the findings of an explorative study about the social impact of the Covid-19 crisis in the Netherlands. The impact is described in several domains of social work: children, youth and families, education, safety, sports and culture, labour, access to justice, income and debts, and vulnerable groups. In all these areas, the Covid-19 measures, in the Netherlands called «an intelligent lockdown», have a huge impact on social life and the psychological well-being of people. Social workers offering services to people in vulnerable positions, like people struggling with unemployment, debts and poverty, children dropping out of online education, elderly in care homes, and people with cognitive, physical or mental impairments, need to find new ways for getting and staying in relation. Community social workers face the challenge to support community life and to work on social cohesion in times of social distancing. Digital communication media become more important, but these needs both the right infrastructure and the skills to be used effectively.*

## *Keywords*

*Social life, Social Work, Covid-19.*

## **Introduction**

In this article we report on the findings of an explorative study about the social impact of the Covid-19 crisis in the Netherlands. This study was conducted by the Research Centre for Social Innovation, which is part of Utrecht University of Applied Sciences. The research centre consists of nine research groups that cover the domains of social work with vulnerable groups, youth, education, delinquency, over-indebtedness and poverty, access to justice, sports and culture and labour participation. The main aim of the study

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was to look at impact on the different fields and the implications for policy and research in these domains. All the research groups were involved in gathering data from their own projects and from national surveys. In this article we give, on behalf of all our colleagues, an overview of the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of people in the Netherlands. Since this is an explorative study, we do not pretend to be complete.

Since the outbreak, nearly 70.000 infected persons and 6.200 deaths have been reported (figure RIVM, 24 August 2020). The measures which were taken by the government since March 2020 were called «an intelligent lockdown», meaning that only the most important sources that may spread the coronavirus were closed or forbidden. Compared to other countries, the precautionary measures in the Netherlands are relatively mild. This means that events, festivals, and other large gatherings were forbidden. Schools, restaurants and gyms were closed as well as hairdressers, massage salons and other places where direct physical contact is involved. People were allowed to go out whenever they wanted to. Recreational areas, parks and beaches were only closed when it was too crowded or when lots of people were expected. Shops were allowed to stay open. Most of them did. Only a couple of large international clothing stores like Hennes & Mauritz closed their doors. People were asked to work at home as much as possible. In the public space there is a social distancing of 1,5 meters enforced and there was a prohibition of gathering implemented, in public spaces. At home people were asked not to receive more than 3 people that do not belong to the same family. Nursing homes and other care institutions were closed for visitors (including family members). In the month of July, most of these measures were gradually smoothed. Public facilities like restaurants, museums and care homes were opened again. Sports and recreational activities were resumed, but keeping social distance. However, since September 2020, the number of infections increased again, exceeding 10.000 new cases per day at the end of October. This caused the government to resume a partial lockdown, closing restaurants and pubs again. At the time of finishing this article, schools were still open, but most public events (sport and culture) as well as public transport were submitted to severe restrictions.

We summarize a number of implications of the pandemic and the lockdown measures in different areas of the social domain.

## Youth

The impact of the pandemic, and in particular the lockdown measures, on young people and educators was significant (UVA, 2020). Young people saw their friends less, lost the structure of school and were able to exercise much less. In half of the juveniles, the period of lockdown also seems to have influenced their well-being: sleeping less, thinking more negatively, feeling lonelier and / or more worried about school and health.

Other young people also experienced positive effects: more time to do things that they find important or enjoyable.

Notably, a great deal of demand has been made on children and young people. Everyone had to stay indoors as much as possible, boredom threatened and suddenly home education had to be provided. Depending on the home situation and the age of the youngsters, this could be quite a challenge. The Social Cultural Plan Bureau (SCP, 2020b) points out that it seems that women took on the care tasks to a greater extent than men. Women have decreased in number of working hours more than men. In addition, a lot of the working mothers shifted their working hours from home to the evenings and weekends to a greater extent than men (Yerkes et al., 2020). During the lockdown, our research centre conducted a questionnaire survey among parents and grandparents; the first analyses reveal a major shift in satisfaction with the balance between work and family.

The outbreak has put entire families under pressure. The national Children's Phone Line for example, noted a 50% increase in the number of children calling for help, partly due to increasing tensions in families (Kindertelefoon, 2020). This happened both by young people in families where physical violence or sexual abuse was involved, and by young people in families where since corona there have been considerably more quarrels between parents and children, and also between parents themselves.

## Education

Closing schools did not only affect well-being. The SCP notes that the sudden transition to online teaching may have had a negative impact on the quality of education (SCP, 2020a). The first images of school leaders after the reopening were that some children have developed disadvantages while others have made a development leap (AVS, 2020). Further research should shed light on the overall picture. In this context, it is important to bear in mind that research shows that the home environment of students has an explicit influence on their school performance, in both a positive and negative sense (Dronkers, 2007). The SCP (2020b) also points out that it is important to be aware of the circumstances of children who are taught in a lockdown. A special side effect of the lockdown was that exam students received their diploma based on the school tests and that the final test was cancelled at primary school. The CPB calculated that this may have the effect that eight percent of the pupils in group eight received lower advice than they would otherwise have received. In particular, pupils with low-educated or low-income parents are generally eligible for adjustment. There is therefore concern that the lack of the final test has affected this group the most (negatively) (CPB, 2020). The transition to online education and back to regular education has put professionals under considerable pressure. We see that teachers, pedagogues and social workers fall back on old habits, old ways of organizing, looking mainly within their own school and see interprofessional cooperation

as a hindrance instead of an opportunity. This reflex is clearly visible, for example, in the arduous cooperation between the schools with after-school care and childcare centres.

Professionals dealing with young people and families, such as teachers and social workers in youth care, are influenced in their daily work by the corona measures. They experienced a higher work pressure due to improvising, especially at the beginning of the lockdown. In addition, there was less contact with some young people and families than before. Good practices are also reported for initiatives within existing and new collaborative relationships and experimenting with blended working with young people and families.

## Safety

In terms of security, the Covid-19 outbreak triggered several things. On the one hand, there was a decrease in the number of thefts, traffic accidents and company burglaries in the first period of the lockdown. The number of burglaries almost halved and the number of traffic accidents fell by about a third. On the other hand, the police also noted that other matters were increasing (Trouw, 27 March 2020). For example, the police were more often called upon for unrest in the neighbourhood between neighbours and WhatsApp fraud was more than doubled (NOS, 2020). There are also indications that the viewing (and therefore also production) of child pornography was increasing (Prescott, McCartan, & Uzieblo, 2020). The lockdown was quite a challenge for young people, among others. Suddenly it was not done longer to hang out in the street together on benches and other places (Van Duin & Wijkhuis, 2020). In mid-July, the police established that crime was back to about the level it was before the outbreak (Nu.nl, 2020), while at the same time riots started to take place in large cities due to bored young people.

In the light of the above, we note that it is important in this special period that attention is paid not only to victims but also to perpetrators of criminal behaviour. From a social perspective, the aim is safety. This requires that fewer people get off the right path or continue that path. As far as detainees are concerned, the outbreak of Covid-19 limited their leave options. This led, among other things, to delays in rehabilitation processes. Incidentally, other offenders (especially those with a lower risk of recidivism) were sometimes released earlier, with an ankle bracelet. So, for them the rehabilitation went more smoothly.

Although the numbers are inconclusive, it appears that the lockdown contributed to an increase in domestic violence. Domestic violence was already a major public health problem before the Covid-19 pandemic, but since the crisis, in which people are forced to stay at home a lot, the problem has become even more urgent. With all the stress and uncertainties about health, work, social relationships and finances and the observed increase in substance use (Trimbos-institute, 2020), it is not surprising that tensions in families are mounting, possibly resulting in violence. In families where these problems already existed, it has also become more difficult to escape from the home situation and

to regulate tensions outside the home. Moreover, assistance seems to be more literally more at a distance for victims of domestic violence (De Vogel & Uzieblo, 2020).

## Sports and culture

The Covid-19 outbreak has a significant impact on the extent to which people move and how the need for culture was fulfilled. With regard to sports and exercise, research shows that during the lockdown, all groups in society started to exercise significantly less (RadboudUMC, 2020). The largest relapse was noted in the group that started working from home. They exercised twenty percent less. In addition to moving less, researchers also found that on average the Dutch people slept more. The explanation for this is sought, among other things, in the fact that staying at home saved travel time. The largest decrease in physical activity took place in the 13-18 age group (NOC NSF, 2020).

The fact that keeping 1.5 meters distance between people (a nationally prescribed rule) will remain the norm for a while, also brings concerns for the future. For example, four out of ten sports associations fear for their survival. They are concerned about losing volunteers and income. There is also a concern that members will cancel their membership and that few new registrations will be made (Hoeijmakers & Van Kalmthout, 2020).

The impact on culture is unprecedented. Museums, stages and concert halls had to close their doors during the «intelligent lockdown». The broad diversity of the cultural sector offers opportunities for social inclusion. In recent years, the cultural sector has been asked to be increasingly self-sufficient, and less dependent on government subsidies. By making the public pay for culture, an attempt was made to take steps in this direction. The loss of income of ticket sales immediately put art and culture under pressure. In the light of the pandemic more attention is needed for the importance of developing ways to continue to give substance to sports and exercise in a 1.5 meters society.

## Labour

When the corona crisis broke out, unemployment in the Netherlands was unprecedentedly low (2.9 %). This meant that attention for increasing labour participation was paid especially to groups like refugees and people with a disability. The outbreak had a huge impact on the focus. Since the outbreak and the lockdown in March 2020, unemployment rose quickly. In July, there were 419.000 people on unemployment benefits. This number equals 4.5 percent of the labour force (CBS, 2020b).

The impact on the labour market is huge. There has been both a decline in supply and a decline in demand. Certain sectors have been hit very hard while others are growing. The planning offices fear that the pandemic will contribute to increasing inequali-

ties in the labour market (CPB, BPL, SCP, 2020). For example, series on the impact of the economic crisis show that the impact varies per education level. The less educated have been hit the hardest. They can take their work home less often and have had to hand in the highest percentage of hours worked. For example, people with a lower level of education have started to work 21 percent less compared to 13 percent in the middle and 10 percent of the higher educated. In terms of the number of hours worked at home, the higher educated rose the most. They worked an average of 16 hours more at home compared to 6 hours by people with a secondary education and 2 hours by people with a lower level of education. In the analysis *Societal consequences of the corona*, the SCP finds that the disadvantage in the labour market of vulnerable groups such as young people, people with a migrant background and the work-disabled is increasing further (SCP, 2020b). They often have temporary employment in vulnerable sectors such as the travel industry, catering, floriculture, culture, sports and recreation.

Working from home takes a toll on employees who struggle to find a balance between work and private life. Research by one of the national labour unions shows that one third of employees experience work pressure higher than ever (CNV, 2020). Sixteen percent say they experience feelings of exhaustion as a result of the workload. Employees report that when the corona just broke out, employers understood that they were trapped by, for example, caring for young children or the lack of a good workspace. As the pandemic lasts, the perceived understanding seems to decrease, thereby leading to increased stress.

## Access to justice

The Covid-19 outbreak also has a major impact on access to justice and legal certainty. For example, the outbreak has resulted in new criminal offenses, such as coughing at a care provider (De Vocht, 2020). To send a signal that corona is being taken seriously, the Public Prosecution Service has focused on the application of summary justice for corona-related offenses almost immediately after the outbreak. At the same time there were delays in other cases. The courts also closed their doors during the first period of the lockdown. The result is that many thousands of cases are suspended (NOS, 2020b).

The introduction of new criminal offenses does not happen overnight. For example, the extraordinary investigating officers who issued the fines often turn out not to have included the correct information, especially in the beginning. The relevant fines cannot then be collected (NOS, 2020c). There is also criticism from the angle of administrative criminal law. For example, there does not seem to be a clear line everywhere when issuing fines. What was allowed in one place was fined in another (NOS 2020d).

There is a discussion going on about human rights in the light of the Covid-19 measures. People are protesting the measures because they consider these a serious restriction of for example the right of free movement.

## Over-indebtedness

Even before Covid-19 broke out, the debt problem in the Netherlands was serious. Despite years of economic prosperity, almost one in five households still struggled with problematic debts. Almost forty percent indicated that they had difficulties to make ends meet (Nibud, 2018). As a result of the outbreak, on top of that, one-fifth of households lost income (Horssen & Verbeek, 2020). In the light of labour market developments and the prospect of expected dismissals, it is widely expected that there will be a (significant) increase in debt problems in some time (Parool, 2020). There are big concerns whether municipalities will be able to cope with a huge increase of people asking for debt counselling (NVVK, 2020). In 2012, municipalities faced a similar task. At the time, the number of people asking for help was enormous (Jungmann & Kruis, 2014). This resulted in waiting lists, but also in a growing group disappearing from sight. As a result, in the past years the accessibility of debt counselling, which is a service funded by the government, has come under severe pressure (Jungmann, 2020).

A second concern is the impact of loss of income on the solubility of debts. In recent years for many households, for various reasons, fixed costs have become relatively high in relation to income. Housing usually takes up most of the fixed costs through rent or mortgage. At the same time, the housing market is so tight that if people have a fall in income, it is almost impossible to find cheaper housing (Binnenlands Bestuur, 2020). If a large group of households has to decrease spending but cannot live cheaper, there is a risk that a growing group will emerge who cannot be helped to resolve their debts. Landlords and mortgage lenders do give a little more room during this period, but if the new income is not sufficient to pay the fixed costs for a longer period of time, there is a risk of an increase in evictions and forced sales.

## Vulnerable groups

The intelligent lockdown asked people to withdraw from social life and to stay at home as much as possible. By giving substance to this, the increase in the number of infections was reversed. At the same time, staying at home also contributed to more feelings of loneliness (England & Kanne, 2020). There are signs that feelings of loneliness in the young and the elderly have increased during the lockdown. Long-term and severe feelings of loneliness are strongly related to psychological problems. Job loss and job insecurity also often have a major impact on mental health. The low-skilled, young people, migrants, people with an occupational disability and employees from shrinking sectors (including self-employed persons) are mainly affected by this and have been (extra) vulnerable since the corona crisis (SCP, 2020c). Although there are no extensive data, the first trends are that in recent months the Dutch population has seen an increase in fear,

stress and (serious) gloom. An estimated one third of the Dutch have experienced these emotions to a greater extent (Engbersen & Wentink, 2020; RIVM & GGD GHOR, 2020).

In general, the Covid-19 crisis has revealed more than before the psychological vulnerability of certain groups and the impact of social isolation. People for example with an intellectual or psychiatric disability are reporting more anxiety and stress. Their daily life has been seriously disrupted because they could not attend day centres or go to work. This has put considerable pressure on households that remain on their feet thanks to the support of family carers and social workers. Research shows that pressure on our psychological well-being can contribute to the development of depression and psychoses (SCP, 2020c). Specific attention is needed for the burden of family carers. The population of nursing homes and the staff working there is extremely hit by the pandemic. Not only did many residents die because of Covid-19, but also many professionals were infected and became ill. Furthermore, the social burden was huge because residents could not be visited by their loved ones. Social isolation led even in a number of cases to health deterioration and death. This is subject to moral deliberation about the need of infection prevention on the one hand, and the severe damaging effects of social isolation on the other hand.

We notice that mental healthcare institutions may be insufficiently equipped to care for more people with psychological problems, asking for help because of the impact of Covid-19. There were already persistent waiting lists before the corona crisis and there was already insufficient appropriate treatment for people with (serious) mental problems. Good information, sufficient capacity and appropriate (acute) accessible assistance are therefore necessary.

The pandemic not only has a huge impact on citizens, social workers also faced major unforeseen challenges. How do you implement outreach work if you also have to work from home as much as possible and give substance to social distancing? And how do you give meaning to remote counselling in an appropriate way? How do you have a conversation with a mother about parenting problems via video calling when the children are also at home all day? We found that across the breadth of the social domain, professionals suddenly faced issues that had never arisen in this way before. Professionals also found that citizens reacted quite differently to the situation that had arisen. Some citizens were immediately extremely concerned about the health risks of themselves and their loved ones, while others even took a decidedly casual attitude towards it. Some citizens are simply not able to adequately interpret their own body and psychological signals. Professionals found that positive and negative effects arose side by side. Where one responded positively to the new situation, for example because of the increased peace, cleanliness, and regularity, it leads to an increase in stress in others. Social workers are required to reorient the services offered, within the framework of new rules of conduct. This means for instance that the use of digital technology, like e-social work gets a boost. This requires new skills, both on the side of professionals as on the side of service users.

At the same time, due to the economic recession foreseen by the Covid-19 measures, there is the threat of budget cuts for social services.

## Conclusion

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is felt in many areas of life. It is not only a major health care issue but has also many economic and social consequences. In this article we highlighted a number of these consequences for the social functioning of individuals and communities in the Netherlands. This is in line with findings in other countries worldwide, as reported by international organisations. A joint statement by ILO, FAO, IFAD and WHO states that the Covid-19 pandemic leads not only to a loss of human life, but also has unprecedented health, social and economic impacts (WHO, 13 October 2020).

We note that in addition to attention to the impact on health and the economy, it is very important to pay explicit attention to the impact on the social life and the psychological well-being of people, knowing that social relationships in the area of work, sports, culture, family and friends are essential for health and well-being. Social workers and other professionals offering services for people in vulnerable positions, like people struggling with unemployment, debts and poverty, children dropping out of online education, elderly in care homes, and people with cognitive, physical or mental impairments, need to find new ways for getting and staying in relation. Community social workers face the challenge to support community life and to work on social cohesion in times of social distancing. Digital communication media become more important, but these needs both the right infrastructure and the skills to be used effectively. The predicted new economic crisis will certainly cause more social problems and an increased need for services. Particularly, the current condition of social workers and the challenges they will face will require new and more in-depth research. The challenge for social work will be to promote the strengths and resilience from people and communities, but at the same time to be able to offer the support needed by the most vulnerable.

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