**‘Veilige Publieke Taak’**

**How communication can improve the effectiveness of its policy**

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**Tanja Hagen, 08000840**

**Supervisor: B.C. van der Sluijs**

**School of European Studies, The Hague University of Applied Sciences**

# Executive summary

In 2007, the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations initiated the program ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’. It was designed to provide employers with guidelines and solutions for handling aggression and violence towards employees with a public task. One of the most important initiatives of this program are the eight measures every public task organisation should apply to aid their employees before and after incidents. Since the start of this program, the Dutch Police Force has not seen a decline in cases of aggression and violence against its employees. Reasons as to why the program has not yet shown a positive effect on aggression and violence towards Dutch police officers may be found in the unsatisfactory internal communication of the policy within the Dutch police organisations. Dutch police officers were interviewed to research their opinion on the communication of the measures provided by the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’, and several indicated the communication of these measures to be insufficient.

This research has been performed for the executive management of all Dutch police organisations, the goal of the research is to find possible methods to improve the current communication of the eight measures provided by the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’. The reason why it is so important to improve the communication of these measures within the Dutch Police Force is firstly to decrease the amount of aggression and violence against police officers, and secondly to improve working conditions for Dutch police officers. Additionally, the credibility of the whole Dutch police organisation should improve, which would lead to more respect from citizens, therefore decreasing the chance of incidents of aggression or violence.

The significant approach to finding a solution to the problem is the internal communication within the Dutch police organisations. Particularly the line communication of the Dutch police organisations needs to be improved. This means that the middle management should communicate the policy and measures provided by the government more effectively to the executive employees. By doing so, involvement from executive employees should be enhanced, improving the effectiveness and awareness of the measures and allowing them to fully fulfil their original purposes. The recommendations are directed at the improvement of that part.

There are four important measures that are not being communicated efficiently by middle management to the executive employees. These measures are: the external communication of limits, stimulation of reporting, promoting denunciations, and training of employees. In the recommendations, short term and long-term recommendations are provided. The short-term recommendations are applicable to the four measures on which the communication needs to be improved. Firstly, limits have to be communicated by police officers to possible perpetrators by giving a warning when they start showing inacceptable behaviour. Secondly, reporting of incidents has to be stimulated by making the writing of reports more accessible, and implementing more control on the reporting of incidents by employees. Thirdly, promoting the denunciation of criminal offences is made easier by focussing internal communication on relevance, easy implementation, and safety of denunciation. Finally, increasing the frequency of training sessions and giving them a more interactive character should improve the training. Additionally, communication will also improve if information on the measures, training, briefings and work meetings is distributed through the intranet of every police force.

The long-term recommendation is an adjustment that is harder to achieve. The recommendation is to change the measures of the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’ into obligated policy, instead of the directives they are now, to prevent different interpretations of the policy, improve the control of enforcement and ensure it reaches its primary targets.

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# Preface

During the last couple of years, the media has given an increased amount of attention to what looks to be one of the most significant social problems that The Netherlands faces nowadays: violence against police officers and other public service providers. The Dutch government has orchestrated many campaigns in the media to create more awareness and reflection on citizens’ behaviour towards police officers and other public service providers.

The campaigns in the media are making citizens aware of the problem, but how much is done by the government to solve the problem from within the police organisations? In 2007, the government initiated a program called ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’, meaning ‘Safe Public Task’, in order to provide guidelines and solutions on how to cope with aggressive behaviour while performing a public task. The program came up with eight measures, which serve as important guidelines for an effective safety policy.

The Dutch government has done its part to support Police organisations in solving the problem, however, the media still express much concern about the situation. It looks as though the problem still has not been solved. Continuous media reports appear suggesting that aggression towards police officers and public service providers has not decreased at all since the government’s initiatives. From the outside it is hard to tell whether the situation has gotten worse, has improved or remained the same. Therefore I started to wonder, if the problem still exists, could it be that the police organisations have not implemented the suggested guidelines and solutions correctly to protect their employees? And if so, are these measures being communicated well enough throughout the police organisations to have the desired effect?

This is how the idea occurred to me to start researching the communication of the eight measures provided by the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’ with the central question: “How can Dutch police organisations communicate the measures of the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’ towards their police officers to improve their approach towards aggression from third parties?” With the following applicable sub questions: “What are the current figures on aggression and violence towards police officers?”, “What is the policy and what is wrong with the communication of it?”, “Why is aggression against police officers a problem, and why can a better communication of the policy improve it?”, “How can the communication problems be solved?”

# Chapter 1: Introduction on the subject

## 1.1 Target audience

The main target audience of this research are the Portfolio managers of Aggression and Violence of the Dutch police organisations. The Portfolio managers are responsible for applying the aggression and violence policies within the police organisations, and for implementing the measures provided by the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’ within their Police Force. The measures of the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’ need to be well communicated towards police officers for it to have its desired effects.

The secondary target group are police officers. Employees have the duty to do their utmost to ensure the limitation and prevention of aggression and violence. The employee is obliged to attend information meetings on their job’s risks, and actively take part in training sessions on handling aggression and violence. Employees have a responsibility to abide by the applicable company- and safety rules, to take measures against the risks of their profession and to protect themselves, colleagues and third parties. Moreover, employees have the crucial moral duty to their employer and colleagues to report incidents of aggression and violence (Expertisecentrum Veilige Publieke Taak, 2011).

## 1.2 Objective

This paper focuses on improving the communication of the eight measures provided by the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’ throughout the Dutch Police Force. Figures show that the original objective of lowering aggression and violence against police officers has not been reached. Research and interviewing police employees should provide a clear indication of the areas that leave room for improvement. By improving the communication of the eight measures, the effectiveness of the Police Force in dealing with aggression and violence will improve, increasing the chance of reaching the program’s purpose.

## 1.3 Methods of research

To create a better understanding of the communication of the aggression policy within the Dutch police organisations, extensive research has been conducted. The used research methods are desk research and qualitative field research. Background information, current figures, information on policies and the theoretical framework are obtained through desk research. Opinions on the communication of the aggression policy are obtained through field research. Following is an extensive clarification on the used research methods.

### 1.3.1 Desk research

Firstly, desk research was done on news web pages to gather information about the current situation of aggression and violence against Dutch police officers in general. With this research, the basis of the subject was founded. This basis of knowledge provided the foundation to start formulating the research questions. While conducting the initial research, it became clear that the actual problem had not yet been solved, and would provide an interesting subject. Secondly, research was done on the current facts and figures on aggression and violence towards police officers via the web page of the Dutch government. The Dutch governmental web page provided a lot of useful information regarding the subject. Thirdly, the web page of the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’ was used as a source for information on the existing policy against aggression and violence towards police officers. Policy manuals that are currently available to police force management for assistance were obtained from the web page of the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’. These manuals proved valuable for getting a better view on the current aggression policy guidelines as provided by the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’. Finally, a theoretical framework was gathered from literature on integrated communication, to establish better communication of the policy within the Dutch police organisations.

### 1.3.2 Field research

To find out how the communication of the policy is currently performed, research is focussed on Dutch police officers, due to their responsibility in the practical implementation of the policy. Field research is divided in three stages. Firstly, nine questionnaires were conducted to get a better view on the current opinions of police officers on the subject of aggression and violence in general, the results can be found in appendix 3. The information obtained from the questionnaires proved to be partly irrelevant because of changes in the scope of this paper. However, they did provide an indication for the frequency of aggression and violence used against police officers. The questionnaire also contained an important question that was useful for the paper. This question was: “Does the organisation spend much attention to the problem of aggression towards its staff?” Secondly, four Dutch police officers from different police organisations were interviewed, these interviews can be found in appendix 2. These interviews were mainly held to identify the areas in which communication of the aggression policy requires improvement. Finally, an extra interview was held with a Dutch police officer later on in the research stage, which can be found in appendix 1. This interview was used to gain an understanding of the degree in which knowledge of the eight measures of the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’ is available at police organisations.

## 1.4 Terms

**VPT: Veilige Publieke Taak (Safe Public Task)**

The program ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’ of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations aims to decrease aggression and violence towards employees with a public task. The program coordinates national measures for the prevention of aggression and violence and the prosecution of perpetrators. To realize this purpose, the VPT has constructed eight measures, which will be further explained in Chapter 3.1. (Expertisecentrum Veilige Publieke Taak, 2007).

**ELA: Eenduidige Landelijke Afspraken (Specific National Agreements)**

In the program of the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’, initiated on October 18th, 2007, the Dutch ministries of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and Justice have promised to apply Specific National Agreements for the Dutch Police Force and the Public Prosecutor. To ensure these agreements have an impact, the local agreements between Police and the Public Prosecutor have been taken as the foundation (Expertisecentrum Veilige Publieke Taak, 2012).

**GTPA: Protocol Geweld Tegen Politie Ambtenaren (Protocol Violence Against Police Officers)**

This is the implemented protocol for Dutch police organisations; this protocol has been formed in response to the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’ program.

**Third parties**

All citizens involved in incidents of aggression and violence towards police officers or other public service providers.

**Public service providers**

All employees that are employed in a public task, such as police officers, fire brigade employees and train conductors.

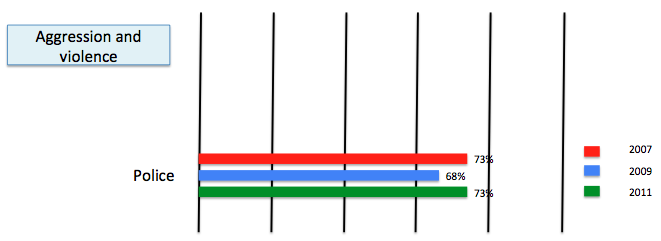
## 1.5 The meaning of aggression towards police officers

Following is the definition of aggression and violence: ‘The deliberate verbal expression of aggression, the usage of physical force or to threaten with it, directed towards an employee, under circumstances that hold direct relation with the performance of the public task, which as a consequence, may result in a feeling of threat, material damage, injury, trauma or death’ (Expertisecentrum Veilige Publieke Taak, 2011).

## 1.6 The current situation

In 2011, research was done on the current state of the problem since commencing the ‘Veilige Publiek Taak’ program. For this research, employees with a public task were interviewed on the situation. The purpose of this research was to see if the measures taken by the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’ had any effect on the occurrence of aggression and violence during duty hours.

The research showed that the percentage of police officers that have come in contact with any form of aggression during duty has not yet decreased since the beginning of the program. As can be seen in figure1, the percentage has not lessened since 2011; it has in fact increased from 2009 until 2011 (Abraham, M., Flight, S., Roorda, W., 2011).

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*Figure 1: Aggression towards police officers*

## 1.7 Effects of aggression and violence on police officers

The following are the known effects on police officers. The first ones are personal effects, such as physical problems and corporal damage. Other effects are developing a feeling of insecurity, or avoidance behaviour among employees with a public task.

Employees who have been confronted with aggression and violence as a result may become fearful in similar situations. In some cases this fear may result in avoidance behaviour: taking no or less action during incidents, neglecting incidents or not standing up for themselves. By communicating the ways of dealing with incidents, the negative effects of aggression and violence on police officers should decrease (Abraham, et al., 2011).

## 1.8 The problem of violence towards police officers

Apart from the personal problems generated by aggression and violence for police officers, there is a far greater problem: the consequences for the credibility of the Dutch Police Force. Experiencing violence during working hours may worsen the functioning of police officers, which could harm the overall quality of the police force. If police officers become weak or have a reputation that suggests this, it may stimulate aggressive behaviour.

Having a police force that does not cope well with aggression and violence has negative consequences for police officers, police organisations and perpetrators.

The program ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’ has not yet achieved significant steps in tackling the problem, which is shown in the subchapter ‘The current situation’. From the research done for the ‘Veilige Publieke Taak’ the conclusion arises that aggression and violence against employees is mostly a consequence of external factors that lie outside of the organisations’ power. These factors cannot be influenced directly by any employers’ policy, as it is a sociological problem and partly lies in the mentality of citizens (Abraham, et al., 2011). However, the government needs to take as much action as possible to solve the problem from their side, by ways of better communicating the measures designed to decrease aggression on police officers.

# Chapter 2: Internal communication of the policy

As a solution for the problem of aggression and violence towards police officers, the VPT has formed eight measures as a guideline for all Dutch police organisations to counteract the problem. However, these measures should be clearly communicated to the executive employees by the middle management of each police force in order to achieve an actual improvement.

## 2.1 The current communication problem

By looking at the organisation and the current aggression figures, as shown in Figure 1 in Chapter 1, it becomes clear that the measures of the VPT have not yet led to enough improvement.

### 2.1.1 The organisation

In the interviews held under Dutch police officers, a great amount of the contestants claim to be dissatisfied by the way the communication of the measures is conducted. The interviews suggest that not all Dutch police organisations have yet implemented the eight measures of the VPT throughout their organisation. Through improved communication of the eight measures within the Dutch police organisations, employees should have better knowledge on how to deal with aggression and violence of third parties during duty.

### 2.1.2 Aggression figures

Looking at the number of incidents, which have not been reduced since the implementation of the program, it becomes clear that the measures of the VPT have not yet achieved their goal. This can be explained by the lack of communication of the eight measures within the Police organisation. Since the amount of aggression and violence used by third parties is something that cannot be fully controlled by the Police, this investigation is aimed at finding possible solutions within the organisation.

## 2.2 Internal communication

To ensure successfulness of a policy, it is vital that the policy is communicated thoroughly throughout the organisation, reaching both managers and the executive employees as well.

An organisation requires cooperation, and for cooperation, internal communication is necessary. Internal communication supports the primary process (provision of service), and advances the employees’ participation within the organisation and their willingness to cooperate on changes. In the public service industry, a lot of work involves third parties, the quality of the internal and external communication is important for the appreciation and respect of these third parties (Vos, M. & Schoemaker, H., 2005).

## 2.3 Significance of appropriate internal communication

* Employees should be well informed on their organisation’s activities.

This is important because employees come in contact with third parties and have to transmit the company’s philosophy. If an employee is well informed by the organisation, he is more likely to communicate this information properly to the third party. An appropriate internal communication will also enhance the external communication.

* Employees should be more considerate while dealing with changing needs and circumstances.

An example in the case of aggression and violence is the policy that has been developed for dealing with aggression and violence by third parties.

* Employees have a greater need for information.

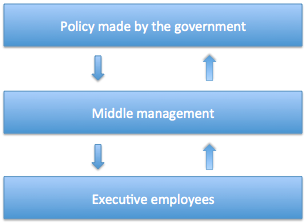
Changes in the organisation bring uncertainty for employees and with that a need for information.

(Vos, M. & Schoemaker, H., 2005)

## 2.4 Line communication

In the case of aggression and violence towards police officers, line communication is of great importance. Examples of line communication in organisations are: one-on-one meetings such as evaluation interviews, functioning –or exit interviews, or group meetings such as, work meetings, board meetings, or trainings. During these gatherings, the communication between employees of the different hierarchies is of vital importance for distributing the procedures concerning aggression and violence towards police officers.

The line communication that concerns the situation of aggression and violence towards police officers is as follows. The Dutch government forms the directives and measures. It is the middle management’s duty to communicate this policy clearly to its employees, also known as the executive employees. Executive employees will report back to the higher hierarchy through reports and by charging the perpetrator (Vos, M. & Schoemaker, H., 2005). In chapters 4 and 6, more information will be provided on the process of reporting of incidents to superiors.



*Figure 2: Line communication*

(Vos, M. & Schoemaker, H., 2005)

# Chapter 3: The Policy and its communication

In 2007, the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations launched the program VPT. With this program the government strived to counter aggression and violence towards public service providers such as police officers. The final goal of the program is that citizens, employers, employees and the Dutch government take responsibility and try to cooperate in repressing aggression and violence by third parties. The target group of the program is public service providers such as police officers, and other public service organisations such as in the sectors of Justice, Health Care or Public Transport. The target of this program is to lower the percentage of public service providers exposed to aggression from 66% to 51% in five years. In 2011, the percentage was lowered to 59% (Rijksoverheid, 2011).

## 3.1 Eight measures of VPT

The program VPT appointed eight measures to improve internal uniformity on the approach of aggression and violence in police organisations. These eight measures provide a basis for an effective safety policy for police officers and other public service providers.

**Measure 1: Externally communicate organisation’s standards of acceptable behaviour.**

The organisation needs to communicate its limits on acceptable and inacceptable behaviour internally and externally. The consequences of violating the limits should as well be communicated.

**Measure 2: Stimulate reporting each event of aggression and violence.**

Employees and witnesses should always report all incidents. It is the employers’ duty to provide a clear indication on which incidents should be reported, and what the procedures for reporting are.

**Measure 3: Register all incidents of aggression and violence towards employees.**

Management of each Police Force determines how they want to be informed about incidents, and what kind of information needs to be registered. The registration procedure needs to be well- known by employees.

**Measure 4: Training on preventing and handling aggression and violence.**

Training sessions should prepare employees for aggression and violence during duty hours. With training, employees can learn how to react more confident and effective towards aggression and violence, by acquiring communicative skills and knowledge.

**Measure 5: React within 48 hours towards perpetrators.**

The employer should react towards the perpetrator within 48 hours after each incident of aggression and/or violence. The reaction possibilities can diverge from an informal reprimand to a civil, administrative, or penal reaction. The employer ought to act upon the reaction policy, and communicate the policy internally.

**Measure 6: Promote the denunciation of criminal offences.**

Denunciating an incident shows the perpetrator, society, and employees that aggression and violence will not be tolerated, and that perpetrators will be prosecuted.

**Measure 7: Claim damages upon the perpetrator.**

The employer ought to communicate the damage claim policy internally, and it needs to be clear who is responsible for the damage claim within the organisation. Employees need to be fully informed on the procedures of damage claims to make sure damage claims are done and fulfil their discouraging effect on aggressive behaviour.

**Measure 8: Provide victims of aggression and violence with aftercare.**

The impact of aggression and violence can be large, and the amount of impact on a victim does not always depend on the severity of the incident. Daily exposure to or witnessing ‘insubstantial forms of aggression and violence’ may lead to severe consequences on employees. Therefore, the aftercare policy needs to be communicated well through the entire organisation.

(Expertisecentrum Veilige Publieke Taak, 2011)

## 3.2 Communication of the measures within the police organisations

A survey was held under nine Dutch police officers about their views on their organisation’s contribution to the problem of aggression and violence towards employees. Four out of nine contestants state that the amount of attention given to the problem by their organisation is insufficient. One contestant explained that the organisation considers the problem to be an aspect of the employees’ duties.

Furthermore, five Dutch Police Force employees were interviewed on their knowledge of the program VPT, and about the communication of the measures. One contestant stated that within his Police Force, the program is known as GTPA (Violence Against Police Officers). This is a code that identifies cases of incidents of physical or verbal violence and aggression against police officers. The Public Prosecutor treats incidents that are qualified with this code with higher priority. Furthermore, the Public Prosecutor will apply heavier punishment on incidents with this code.

Employees point out that they have basic knowledge of the eight measures of the VPT, but not all measures are clearly communicated to all employees. Within each police force organisation, an employee with a high function receives the GTPA portfolio, which may be shaped according to the organisation’s standards. The portfolio manager communicates the policy to the force chiefs, who pass the important points on to their employees. Not all points of the GPTA or VPT are communicated to police officers. Only practical measures are communicated, the reason for this is the fact that police officers already have a lot of information to process, such as policy changes or adaptions in protocols. Therefore, some measures of the VPT are excluded because management finds them irrelevant. One interviewee points out that it would be better if every Police Force is obliged to follow each of the eight measures correctly, to achieve a national standard. Other wishes pointed out by employees are a need for more training, a better communication of the importance of reporting and denunciation after incidents, and briefings on incidents that cross the border of tolerance.

The measures that are communicated satisfactory are: Always register. Always react. Always provide aftercare. Always give feedback regarding charges against the perpetrator. According to the interviews, these four measures are well communicated throughout the organisation. (See the appendices for the interviews and surveys)

## 3.3 Communication analysis of the VPT measures based on the interviews

The interviews indicate that the VPT itself is not well known by police officers, it is however known to their chiefs, albeit under the name of GTPA. The measures that are generally known by police officers are the ones pointed out below. The left box shows the terms used by police officers for the measures of the VPT displayed on the right.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **GTPA** | **VPT** |
| Always register. | Register all incidents of aggression and violence towards employees. |
| Always react. | React within 48 hours towards perpetrators. |
| Always provide aftercare. | Provide victims of aggression and violence with aftercare. |
| Always give feedback regarding made charges against the perpetrator. | Provide victims of aggression and violence with aftercare. |

As can be seem from the table, three of the measures of VPT appear in the policy that is being communicated to police officers, meaning that five of the measures of VPT are not or barely communicated to them at all. This clearly indicates the lack of efficiency in the internal communication of the VPT measures at the Dutch Police Force.

Not all measures are relevant enough to be communicated in advance, such as the measure of damage claim, which could be communicated after an incident has occurred.

In order to improve the situation of aggression and violence the Dutch Police Force should improve its communication of the following measures:

* **Externally communicate organisation’s standards of acceptable behavior**

The external communication of the organisation’s standards will provide more clarity to third parties and should discourage possible perpetrators from committing offences.

* **Stimulate reporting each event of aggression and violence.**
* **Promote the denunciation of criminal offences.**

Stimulation of reporting incidents, and the promotion of denunciation of incidents should both encourage self-confidence of police officers and discourage aggressive behaviour by perpetrators. It is of great concern that employees are aware of their importance; as it influences the way an employee exposed to aggression and violence reacts upon incidents. If the importance of these measures is not communicated thoroughly to the employees, they may neglect to take actions after an incident has occurred, because they might consider it futile.

* **Training on preventing and handling aggression and violence.**

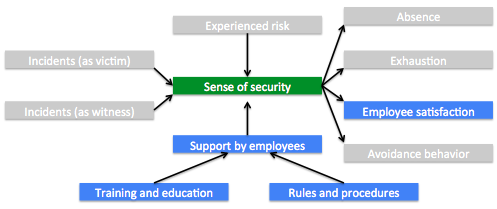
Training plays a strategic part in an effective aggression policy. During training sessions, police officers learn about the relevance of the violence policy and gain indebt knowledge on how to handle aggression and violence. They also gain knowledge about aftercare and denunciation following incidents, which will make for a more complete preparation of police officers.

This chapter has elaborated on the communication problems of the policy within the Dutch police organisations. The next chapter contains the consequences for police officers, and how a better communication policy will improve the efficiency of the VPT measures.

# Chapter 4: Problems of aggression towards police officers

This chapter will explain why aggression and violence against police officers is a problem, and how a better communication of the policy can provide a solution.

## 4.1 Consequences for police officers



*Figure 3: Employees’ sense of safety*

Figure 3 shows the components that contribute to the sense of safety as experienced by police employees. The model shows that whenever employees feel less safe, the tendency of avoidance behaviour grows, resulting in avoiding possibly dangerous situations with third parties. Another negative effect is work stress or exhaustion, with possible absence as a consequence. Furthermore, feelings of insecurity may lead to a lower job satisfaction experienced by employees. The level of satisfaction experienced by employees will have an impact on their performance during duty (Montford, van M., Hogendoorn, R., Kolar, C., Visser, E., 2009). These consequences will be further highlighted in this chapter.

### 4.1.1 Avoidance behaviour

Avoidance behaviour consists of avoiding possibly dangerous situations with aggressive or violent third parties. Recent studies show that 14% of public service providers show avoidance behaviour. Figures show that 8% of public service providers tend to be less strict than their job requires while carrying out their tasks, to avoid dangerous situations. Moreover, avoidance behaviour may also lead to employees being afraid to stand up for themselves when they come in contact with aggressive or violent third parties during duty (Montford, van M. et al., 2009).

### 4.1.2 Absence caused by work stress and exhaustion

Almost 1 out of 10 employees with a public task indicate that they experience work stress and/or exhaustion on a regular basis, while carrying out their job. A possible consequence of work stress and/or exhaustion is increased absence of employees. Another well-known consequence of incidents is PTSD (Montford, van M. et al., 2009).

**PTSD**

PTSD means Posttraumatic Stress Disorder following a life-threatening event, causing a severe emotional reaction. Physical reactions such as nightmares, flashbacks and heart palpitation are a common consequence of PTSD. The victim tends to refuse to talk about the traumatic incident that caused the disorder and generally loses interest in his surroundings. Other symptoms are hyper-activity, sleep disorders, irritability, cautiousness or aggressiveness. PTSD is a common reason for employees not being able to fulfill their duty (National Institute of Mental Health, 2009).

### 4.1.3 Job satisfaction

Feelings of insecurity can have a negative influence on employees’ job satisfaction. Employees need to receive support from their employer to be able to handle aggression and violence during duty hours. This support should consist of training, a clear safety policy and aftercare. Support by the employer contributes to maintaining the job satisfaction as experienced by employees on a high level. (Montford, van M. et al., 2009).

## 4.2 Consequences for the Dutch Police Organisation and government

Consequences of aggression and violence affect the Police Officer and the execution of his or her public task. The authority and integrity of the government is also harmed, and with that the functioning of the constitutional state. Aggression and violence cause extra costs for the government, because of lawsuits, the need for extra training facilities, aftercare and other costs following incidents (Expertisecentrum Veilige Publieke Taak, 2012).

## 4.3 Consequences for perpetrators

Perpetrators are exposed to risks when engaging in aggressive behaviour towards police officers. A recent example of these risks is the severe case that occurred on November 24th, 2012, on the train station ‘Hollands Spoor’ in The Hague. A young man had reportedly threatened someone on the station using a weapon. When Police officers arrived they found the young man, and ordered him to hold his hands up in the air so that they could safely approach him. Instead of holding his hands up in the air, the young man reacted by grasping towards his waist. The police officer in return reacted by shooting at the young man, with fatal results. This is a worst-case scenario and both parties included made mistakes. However, if the young man had shown respect for the officers’ authority and acted accordingly, he would probably still be alive (Novum, 2012). Another consequence for perpetrators is risking fines and prosecution.

## 4.4 Solving the consequences by improving the communication of the policy

### 4.4.1 Issues with current policy

The following measures of the VPT are not yet efficiently communicated towards police officers:

* 1. Externally communicate organisation’s standards of acceptable behaviour
* 2. Stimulate reporting each event of aggression and violence.
* 4. Training on preventing and handling aggression and violence.
* 6. Promote the denunciation of criminal offences.

### 4.4.2 Consequences of the current policy issues

As explained in the previous paragraphs, the issues of the current policy result in negative consequences for police officers, the Police Organisation and the Dutch government.

Following are communication improvements based on the measures of the VPT, which the police organisations should consider in order to decrease aggression and violence towards their employees.

**Measure 1: Externally communicate organisation’s standards of acceptable behaviour**

Standard norms and rules need to be formed based on the VPT standard. By ensuring each police force has clear standards, police officers will have less room for interpretation of what acceptable behaviour means. The VPT provides the following four norms that need to be communicated to third parties for a safe execution of the public task:

* Grant space to professionals performing their duty
* Follow the professional’s orders
* Do not disturb public order
* Aggressive and violent behaviour towards professionals with a public task will never be tolerated

Management of each Police Force is responsible for setting up clear norms for acceptable behaviour, and needs to make sure these norms are known both internally as externally.

Each employee needs to have knowledge of these norms, and new employees need to be informed about the norms within four months after their appointment. It is necessary to determine a clear reaction policy in case of exceeding the norm. The external communication of this norm to third parties is the responsibility of each employee.

By creating clarity about the limits of permissible behaviour, employees will more easily determine whether an incident should be reported, and if the situation requires a reaction towards the perpetrator (Expertisecentrum Veilige Publieke Taak, 2011).

**Measure 2: Stimulate reporting each event of aggression and violence.**

The management of each Police Force determines the procedure for violence in collaboration with the portfolio manager. The management is responsible for defining and communicating to their employees what incidents of aggression and violence need to be reported, and to whom. To stimulate the compliancy to report incidents, the procedure and importance of reporting an incident need to be communicated to the employee. Whenever an incident occurs, work meetings should provide clarity on the follow up actions after the incidents. By giving feedback of the taken measures against the perpetrator, the involved employee will know that his report is being treated in a serious and professional way.

Standard information advised by the VPT to report after incidents are:

* Register the date, time, and the location of the incident
* Register the name of the victim
* Register the names of witnesses
* Register the name(s) of the perpetrator(s)
* Provide a short description of the incident

(Expertisecentrum Veilige Publieke Taak, 2011)

**Measure 4: Training on preventing and handling aggression and violence**

The management of each police organisation determines the training program. The content of the programs and the frequency in which they take place may differ per police organisation. New employees need to follow training on aggression and violence within the first four months of their appointment. Each employee needs to follow training on handling aggression and violence at least once every two years. The timeous communication of these training sessions is of importance to insure participation of the employees. Exercising the actual knowledge gained by training in practical situations is of great importance and lies within the responsibility of each employee.

For determining the form of training, each Police Force management determines the desired result of training sessions, in terms of contributing to the desired organisation culture. Moreover, specification is required on whether the training should be on-the-job training, or whether the training should take place at a training centre. Additionally, the minimal amount of training weeks per year needs to be determined. The VPT does not grant a norm on the minimal amount of training weeks per year (Expertisecentrum Veilige Publieke Taak, 2011).

**Measure 6: Promote the denunciation of criminal offences.**

Denunciation of incidents before the Public Prosecutor shows perpetrators, society and employees that aggression and violence are not tolerated by police organisations, and that perpetrators will not get away with their actions. Each employee needs to be informed on the fact that the Public Prosecutor prioritizes detection and punishment of perpetrators of aggression and violence towards employees with a public task.

The management of each police force has the responsibility of determining a procedure of denunciation, and will need to communicate this procedure to their employees. Management should communicate the fact that it denounces all perpetrators guilty of aggression and violence against its employees to stimulate the employees to follow its example. To prevent the perpetrators from receiving the victim’s personal information via the charge declaration form, management should communicate the importance of using the address details of the police organisation, instead of his or her personal address. By doing so, the sense of safety experienced by employees will increase, encouraging future denunciations by police officers (Expertisecentrum Veilige Publieke Taak, 2011).

# Chapter 5: Conclusion

The program VPT has not yet reached its goal regarding violence towards the Dutch Police Force, as signs from both inside and outside the police organisations indicate.

The problem of aggression and violence towards police officers has two sides. On the one hand, it is a social nation-wide problem that has to do with ethics and education. On the other hand, one can argue that the VPT program has not been as successful as it could be, if internal communication by the police organisations were up to the mark.

The problem of aggression and violence towards police officers is partly beyond the reach of the Dutch government and the Dutch Police Force. Dutch citizens have a shared responsibility in the matter as well. However, to ensure the Dutch government and Police Force maximize their contribution to solving the problem, the internal communication of the policy within the police organisations should be improved.

Police officers need to clearly communicate their norms, standards and limits to third parties they come in contact with during duty. To enable the employees to do so, the organisation first has to clearly communicate all the available policy information to them, and check if the knowledge is applied. This can be done through efficient line communication. If the line communication in the police organisations works properly, information on dealing with the problem of aggression and violence will flow from the government to middle management, to the executive employees, and back upward the hierarchy.

The communication between the government and middle management of the police organisations is satisfactory. An example of this good cooperation is the web page created by the government, specially designed for employers of public tasks to inform them about the policy and its guidelines. However, looking at the next segment of the line communication, one cannot help but conclude that the communication between middle management and executive employees lacks profundity and efficiency, as is proven by the held interviews.

The interviewed police officers indicate that not all of the measures of the government’s VPT program are common knowledge on the work place. This looks to be a significant reason for why the VPT has not reached its original goal to lower the amount of aggression and violence towards police officers. There are several advantages to the Dutch Police Force applying and communicating all the measures more efficiently within its organisations. Most importantly, aggression and violence towards police officers will decrease, and along with that, consequences like avoidance behaviour, work stress, work exhaustion and employee’s absence will decrease significantly.

To make sure all the measures of the VPT are well-known throughout the Dutch Police Force, recommendations are given in the following chapter.

# Chapter 6: Recommendations

The internal communication between middle management and executive employees in the Dutch Police Force does not work properly. There is still a significant gap between middle management and the executive employees. Middle management needs to keep tabs on the execution of the procedures by the executive employees, by controlling their knowledge and actions proactively. Work meetings and training sessions should be used as tools to bridge the distance. Work meetings and training sessions will furthermore amend the ‘line communication’ as explained in Chapter 2. Additionally, work meetings and training sessions are a good setting for middle management to discuss the measures with employees.

The recommendations are divided in short-term and long-term recommendations; the short-term recommendations contribute to amending the current problem with a temporary approach, and are more compliant. The long-term recommendation demands a larger adjustment by the government.

## 5.1 Short-term recommendations

**Measure 1: Externally communicate organisations’ standards of acceptable behaviour**

Following needs to be communicated to the executive employees during work meetings and training:

*The limits*: The limits of acceptable behaviour are any forms of verbal and physical violence.

*What to do when limits are exceeded*: When a third party threatens to cross these limits, the police officer is required to immediately alert the individual(s) on the limits and the fact that verbal and physical violence will not be tolerated and will be perceived as a criminal offence. For instance, by saying the following sentence:

*“This is your last warning, you are about to commit a criminal offence by offending a police officer, next time I may arrest you”.*

This example should be well communicated during training sessions on violence and aggression by third parties.

**Measure 2: Stimulate reporting each event of aggression and violence**

*Stimulation*

To stimulate the reporting incidents by police officers, reporting should be made as accessible as possible. Therefore, standard report forms should be introduced with the standard information required: date, time, location of the incident; the name of the victim; the names of witnesses; the name of the perpetrator(s); a short description of the incident. These forms should be available through intranet and in police cars at all times.

*More control on the reporting of incidents*

More control is needed on how consequent the employees are with reporting incidents. During work meetings middle management should query their employees if they have experienced any (severe) incidents, and simply ask if they have reported these incidents. If employees state not to have reported all incidents, the middle management should steer them into reporting all incidents in the future. If it turns out that an officer systematically fails to report incidents, the employee should be reassembled in a one-on-one meeting, to stress the importance of reporting and to prevent it from happening again in the future.

**Measure 4: Training on preventing and handling aggression and violence**

*Higher quantity of training*

Instead of providing a training session each two years, a compulsory training is advisable for every employee once a year. Additionally, if employees express the need for more training on aggression and violence during duty, the police organisation should provide them with the opportunity to do so externally. An example of additional training sessions can be a self-defence course at an external training organisation. Moreover, new employees should follow their training on aggression and violence before they start their first day of duty, instead of within the first four months of their appointment.

*Training should be interactive*

By means of a better line communication, middle management should hand out instructions for the employees to follow. However, employees must also provide input. This will make training sessions more practical and employees will become more involved. To verify the employee’s knowledge on the policy on aggression and violence, every employee should provide a practical example. Another employee then indicates how he would react to the situation. This is an example of better line communication, the information passes to both sides of the hierarchy, on one side the middle management will learn how their employees deal with certain situations, on the other hand employees will learn how to deal with certain situations from the middle management.

**Measure 6: Promote the denunciation of criminal offences**

*The internal communication needs to focused on relevance, easy implementation and safety of denunciation*

When it comes to aggression and violence, employees need to be thoroughly informed on the zero tolerance policy of the police organisation. Employees need to know that the Dutch Police Force has a close cooperation with the Public Prosecutor, and that the Public Prosecutor prioritizes cases of violence and aggression against police officers. Guaranteeing the integrity of victims and their personal details should stimulate denunciation of criminal offences. An effective zero-tolerance policy, supported by active denunciation of criminal offences will send a clear message to possible perpetrators, and should have a discouraging effect on aggressive behaviour.

**Keep information available at all times**

Keep information on the policy and the contents of training sessions updated on the organisation’s intranet, providing information to employees at all times.

## 5.2 Long-term recommendation

The eight measures of the VPT are directives, which means that every police organisation may interpret the measures in their own way. As the interviewed employee states in Chapter 3, the Dutch police organisations should be obliged to follow the measures as provided by the VPT, to achieve a national standard. A united Dutch Police Force, with equal standards, will provide a strong image to society, which should lead to more respect from citizens. More respect from citizens, will contribute to the VPT’s original goal of decreasing aggression and violence towards police officers.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Interview J. van Capelleveen

Van Capelleveen, J.

Regio Rotterdam

- Hoeveel weet je van het programma Veilige Publieke Taak?

Ik weet dat het bij ons GTPA heet (Geweld tegen politie ambtenaren). Deze code wordt bij ons toegevoegd bij incidenten tegen politie. Zoals fysiek geweld en verbaal geweld. Door het toevoegen van deze code weet het OM ook dat de zaak voorrang behoeft. Ook eist het OM hogere straffen en deze worden ook vaak door de rechtbank gehonoreerd.

-Weet je wat de acht maatregelen van deze taak zijn?

Ik zou ze niet kunnen opnoemen zo denk ik. Maar de speerpunten bij ons zijn:

Altijd registreren. Altijd doorpakken. Altijd nazorg. Altijd terugkoppeling van straffen.

-Zijn er maatregelen waar je nog nooit van hebt gehoord?

Nee, ik heb ze net gelezen en ze zijn niet nieuw voor me. Zo duidelijk zijn ze alleen niet doorgecommuniceerd naar ons.

-Denk je dat collega's het programma goed kennen?

Nee niet zoals het op die site staat. Wel die speerpunten die ik net opnoemde. Die zijn wel goed en duidelijk bij elke collega bekend.

-Hoe wordt het programma gecommuniceerd binnen de organisatie?

Er krijgt iemand die een hoge functie heeft bij de politie de portefeuille van GTPA. Deze moet er vorm aan gaan geven. Die delegeert weer naar beneden naar chefs. De chefs krijgen de taak om de speerpunten uit te leggen aan de werknemer. Dit gebeurt in het algemeen in werk overleggen. The employee does point out that it would be better if every Police Force was obliged to follow each of the eight measures correctly, to achieve a national standard.

-Denk je dat het programma goed wordt gecommuniceerd?

Er is beslist om die speerpunten die ik net noemde bekend te maken onder de collega's en niet het hele programma. Deze strategie snap ik wel. Het is denk ik niet noodzakelijk om voor elke politieagent te weten wat het programma precies inhoudt. Wel wat het voor hem betekent in zijn werk. Dus de praktische zaken zijn goed door gecommuniceerd.

-Denk je dat het een probleem vormt als het programma niet goed gecommuniceerd wordt?

Nee ik snap wel dat het programma gefilterd wordt voor de agent op straat. De agent op straat krijgt al heel veel te horen namelijk. Er zijn veel dingen die een agent moet weten en rekening mee moet houden. Daarom denk ik dat het juist goed is om alleen de kern uit te leggen.

-Hou zou het programma naar jouw mening beter gecommuniceerd kunnen worden om een beter effect te behalen?

Een lastige vraag. Dit programma is niet het enige wat moet worden door gegeven aan de medewerker. De medewerker krijgt veel van boven opgelegd. Veel beleidsveranderingen en veel aanpassingen in protocollen. Misschien als ze hier meer belang aan hechten en dat duidelijk aangeven dat dit belangrijker is dan de rest. Dan blijft het misschien beter hangen. En ook vaker blijven aangeven dat het zo belangrijk is.

## Appendix 2: Interviews

Interviewee: anonymous

1. Waar ligt volgens u de oorzaak van het probleem? (Persoonlijk, maatschappij, sociaal). Hoe zou het probleem eventueel bij de oorzaak aangepakt kunnen worden?

De maatschappij verhardt. Dit is heel lastig aan te pakken denk ik. Het heeft te maken met de mondige burger, maar ook met eerder optreden van een politieagent. Als iemand eerder onheus is bejegend zal hij zich agressiever opstellen tegen de politie. Dus als een agent zich niet netjes gedraagt heeft dit gevolgen voor de andere agenten. Al moet ik zeggen dat bij veel mensen al bij voorbaat het respect jegens de politie ver te zoeken is.

2. Hoe zou de burger voorgelicht kunnen worden over de grenzen van agressief gedrag tegen politie agenten?

Het moet al vroeg beginnen. Dus bij de jeugd. Het gebeurt nog vaak dat de ouders de kleine kinderen bang maken voor de politie. Zo van: pas maar op want anders nemen ze je mee. Of als papa of mama een bekeuring krijgt ze dan zeggen: kijk die politieman is gemeen of onaardig. Dat ze hun eigen fouten toeschrijven op de politie die een bekeuring uitschrijft.

3. Worden alle maatregelen van de VPT duidelijk binnen uw organisate doorgecommuniceerd?

Niet alle maatregelen die ik op de site van de Veilige Publieke Taak zie worden gecommuniceerd.

4. Wat vind u van het huidige beleid die uw korps voert tegen agressie?

Zowel het beleid van het korps als het OM is verzwaard ten opzichte van geweld tegen ambtenaren. De straffen zijn hoger en de bereidheid om door te pakken is hoger.

5. Wat zou u veranderen aan het beleid als u het voor het zeggen zou hebben?

Ik zou een korte periode zero tolerance instellen. Zo geef je een signaal af. Misschien is de drempel daarna hoger om in de toekomst agressie of geweld te plegen tegen ambtenaren.

Interviewee: Bijsterbosch, J.

Amsterdam.

1. Waar ligt volgens u de oorzaak van het probleem? (Persoonlijk, maatschappij, sociaal). Hoe zou het probleem eventueel bij de oorzaak aangepakt kunnen worden?

Drank en drugs gebruik. Volgens mij moet een veel steviger alcoholmatigings beleid gevoerd worden.

2. Hoe zou de burger voorgelicht kunnen worden over de grenzen van agressief gedrag tegen politie agenten?

Algemene voorlichting vanuit de landelijke overheid, maar ook voorlichting over het optreden van het OM tegen deze agressieplegers.

3. Worden alle maatregelen van de VPT duidelijk binnen uw organisate doorgecommuniceerd?

Op zich komen de maatregelen mij bekend voor, al zou ik denken dat we meer baat hebben bij meer training over deze situaties.

4. Wat vind u van het huidige beleid die uw korps voert tegen agressie?

Het beleid binnen het korps is onderdeel van een landelijk beleid. Dat is goed omdat een een aantal maatregelen zowel preventief als repressief genomen zijn.

5. Wat zou u veranderen aan het beleid als u het voor het zeggen zou hebben?

Verdachten pas in vrijheid als ze hun straf gehad hebben en de schade betaald is.

Interviewee: Jaket, M.

Noord en Oost Gelderland

1. Waar ligt volgens u de oorzaak van het probleem? (Persoonlijk, maatschappij, sociaal). Hoe zou het probleem eventueel bij de oorzaak aangepakt kunnen worden?

Een ieder persoon die agressiviteit vertoont heeft vaak zijn eigen verhaal. Dit kan een psychische aandoening zijn, maar ook persoonlijk problemen. Ik vind het daarom moeilijk te zeggen, waar dat probleem zou kunnen worden aangepakt.

2. Hoe zou de burger voorgelicht kunnen worden over de grenzen van agressief gedrag tegen politie agenten?

Dit wordt al geregeld gedaan via televisie, namelijk van SIRE. De personen die agressie vertonen tegen politie hebben soms een negatieve ervaring meegemaakt, waarbij zij vinden dat ze benadeeld zijn door de politie/overheid. Dit kan een oorzaak zijn. Het is moeilijk om deze personen van mening te laten veranderen. Ik denk dat het begint om op scholen kenbaar te maken wat de doelstelling van politie is en benadrukken dat politie de orde handhaaft en wil zorgen voor de veiligheid.

3. Worden alle maatregelen van de VPT duidelijk binnen uw organisate doorgecommuniceerd?

Ik vind niet dat het belang van de reports en denunciation erg duidelijk wordt gecomuniceerd binnen onze organisatie. Leidinggevenden gaan er van uit dat als wij het belangrijk genoeg vinden, wij het zelf wel aangeven. Ik heb in het verleden eens een vrouwelijke college gehad die niet zeker wist wat zij met de situatie aanmoest, of het wel ernstig genoeg was om ere en zaak van te maken of niet, het ging om sexuele intimidatie en zij had het idee dat ze misschien overdreef. Later heeft zij toch op aanraden van collega’s aangifte gedaan tegen deze man. Daarom denk ik dat voorlichting belangrijk is zeker voor dit sort twijfelgevalen.

4. Wat vind u van het huidige beleid die uw korps voert tegen agressie?

Er worden hogere straffen geëist en dat vind ik goed.

5. Wat zou u veranderen aan het beleid als u het voor het zeggen zou hebben?

Eerder geweld mogen gebruiken voor politieambtenaren. Hogere straffen eissen i.v.m. geweld tegen hulpverleners, gemakkelijker straffen uitdelen.

Interviewee: Lindaart, S.

Noord en Oost Gelderland

1. Waar ligt volgens u de oorzaak van het probleem? (Persoonlijk, maatschappij, sociaal). Hoe zou het probleem eventueel bij de oorzaak aangepakt kunnen worden ?

Burgers worden steeds mondiger en vinden dat zij vaak veel meer rechten hebben en minder plichten. In het verleden is er wellicht te weinig opgetreden door politie waardoor er nu een aardig veld bevochten dient te worden.

2. Hoe zou de burger voorgelicht kunnen worden over de grenzen van agressief gedrag tegen politie agenten ?

Wellicht via overheidscampagnes maar ook duidelijk op de politiebureaus maken welk gedrag wel en niet getolereerd wordt.

3. Worden alle maatregelen van de VPT duidelijk binnen uw organisate doorgecommuniceerd?

Ik vind nog niet dat er genoeg trainings worden gegeven binnen mijn korps.

4. Wat vind u van het huidige beleid die uw korps voert tegen agressie ?

Dit is afgelopen jaren sterk verbeterd. Veel meer aandacht voor de politiemedewerker, opleiding en indien toch een incident zich voordoet, sprake van ontzorging.

5. Wat zou u veranderen aan het beleid als u het voor het zeggen zou hebben?

## Appendix 3: Survey results

