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Coffeeshops, Cannabis and Crowds in Present-Day Amsterdam

Waterbed effect¹, crowds, and nuisance

I was asked to look specifically at the issue of cannabis consumption, relating to present intensifying debates around tourism and the use of public space. I will focus on two questions in the fast talk webinar: (1) methods used in our research (criminology/anthropology); the importance of public space in relation to drug consumption and (2) concrete strategies used to date to deal with this issue?

Background information

The number of coffeeshops in the Netherlands has been declining steadily since the mid-1990s, from approximately 1,500 to 570 (in March 2019), spread over 102 municipalities.² In recent years, the number of coffeeshops seems to have stabilized. Although Amsterdam has always had more coffeeshops compared to other large Dutch municipalities, the number there has also fallen sharply from 288 in 1999 to 168 in 2018³ and to 166 in 2020,⁴ which is more than a third of all coffeeshops in the Netherlands.

¹ The 'waterbed' is a commonly used metaphor for the displacement of a problem, e.g., crime or nuisance, to another area, e.g., another neighborhood. The idea is that the total volume of the waterbed remains the same. But that's not always the case, according to criminological research.

² Mennes, R., Schoonbeek, I., van der Molen, J. en Bieleman, B. (2019) *Coffeeshops in Nederland 2018. Aantallen coffeeshops en gemeentelijk beleid 1999 -2018*. Breuer onderzoek en IntraVal advies. WODC, Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid.

³ Mennes et al. 2019

⁴ Snippe J, Mennes R & Bieleman B (2020) De markt voor coffeeshops in de gemeente Amsterdam: 2020-2025. Breuer & IntraVal.

About half of all the coffeeshops in Amsterdam are in the city centre.⁵ The others are mainly located in the surrounding nineteenth-century neighborhoods. The municipality of Amsterdam has the lowest number of inhabitants per coffeeshop (1 coffeeshop per 5,138 inhabitants).⁶ However, the (soft) drug tourists now form a substantial part of the total number of customers, yet are not included in this statistic.

Crowds, nuisance, and the waterbed effect

Over the past decade the steady decline in the number of coffeeshops in Amsterdam (because of more stringent policy) and growing number of foreign customers has put pressure on public spaces. It causes overcrowding in some areas in the immediate vicinity of coffeeshops, more nuisance for residents and shopkeepers, and more street dealers trying to catch potential coffee shop customers.⁷

The case I want to explain is the closing of 22 coffeeshops in a centre district in the context of Project 1012. Coffeeshops in a 250-metre vicinity of schools were ordered to close during school hours (according to the 'distance criterion'). As a result, the remaining coffeeshops in the centre are confronted with many more customers. This resulting overcrowding in and around the coffeeshops is contradictory to principles of national and local coffeeshop policy, such as small-scale, good information for customers and no nuisance for the neighbourhood. The Amsterdam coffeeshop industry, represented by the Cannabis Association Retailers (BCD), fears that these problems will increase in the future and called for research into the subject.

Used methods

The research (undertaken January to May 2016) was conducted in and around district 1012 (Amsterdam-Centre). In addition to studying literature, we used a combination of

⁵ Korf, D., Doekhie, J. & Wouters, M. (2011) Amsterdamse coffeeshops en hun bezoekers. Bonger Instituut voor criminologie (UVA).

⁶ Mennes et al. 2019.

⁷ Korf, D., Liebrechts, N. & Nabben, T. (2016) Waterbed, drukte en overlast. Effecten sluitingsbeleid coffeeshops in Amsterdam-Centrum. Bonger Instituut voor criminologie (UVA). Amsterdam: Rozenberg publishers.

qualitative and quantitative empirical methods. First, we made an inventory of all the coffeeshops in the district and made a representative selection based on location, size, number of seats, and whether or not there was a doorman. Then we used the following methods:

- Interviews with owners and staff (28 in total) in coffeeshops.
- Collection of numbers/figures on the development of cannabis sales (between January 2013 and 31 December 2015).
- Interviews with 30 residents and entrepreneurs in the immediate vicinity of the coffeeshops (field interviews).
- Systematic observations near and in coffeeshops, plus counts of the number of customers per half hour (total 93).
- Survey among 587 coffeeshop visitors.
- Field research on street dealing.

Conclusion from research

The strong increase in the number of visitors in certain coffee shops in the city center demonstrates not only a waterbed effect in the form of spatial and temporal displacement, but also a considerable increase in the numbers of tourists visiting coffeeshops. In other words: 'a lot of water has also been added'. That is a general development in the city. Although coffeeshops are attractive to a certain group of tourists, the growth in tourism seems to be mainly caused by other factors, such as cheap flights. The overcrowding in and around the coffeeshops contradict the basic principles of national and local coffee shop policy, such as small-scale, good information to customers and no nuisance to neighbours. Channelling the crowds through coffeeshops with (exclusively) a 'takeaway counter' does not offer a real solution, especially not in the centre, where most coffeeshop visitors do not just come to buy cannabis, but also to hang out there. More 'takeaway coffeeshops' would result in more cannabis use in public spaces. An increasing minority of foreign coffeeshop visitors do not smoke in their own country.

New plans mayor and concrete strategies

In 2020 the mayor of Amsterdam proposed that marijuana only be sold to Dutch citizens (the 'I-criterium')⁸ to stop the flow of young tourists visiting Amsterdam just to smoke. If this plan passes, it is estimated that another 100 coffeeshops will close.⁹

This raises the question of what the short- and long-term consequences of the implementation of the I-criterion will be for: coffeeshops and growers (supply); residents (household) tourists & day trippers (demand); hotels & B&B's (economy); Amsterdam as cool city (image and tolerance); police & justice (enforcement); vulnerable youth, markets, and street dealers (illegal street market).

The strategy (question 2) requires a critical research approach using theoretical and empirical data, to understand the dynamics of the cannabis market and the consequences of closing more coffeeshops. Besides collecting data, it is also necessary to become involved in debates with politicians, to raise opinions in magazines, radio broadcast etc., and to establish contacts with stakeholders (health, prevention etc.) as well as with key persons involved in the coffeeshop circuit (market).

⁸ I-criterium is a ban on non-residents who are wanting to visit a coffeeshop.

⁹ Snippe J, Mennes R & Bieleman B (2020) De markt voor coffeeshops in de gemeente Amsterdam: 2020-2025. Breuer & Intraval.