

Summary

Less than lethal weapons for the Mobile Unit explored

A study into demand, (new) supply and public support



*Jaap Timmer, Joey Wolsink, Juno van Esseveldt, Kenny Kathmann en Henk Ferwerda
Bekereeks, ISBN 978-94-92255-59-4*

Conclusions after scientific research

1. There is no reason to introduce an additional weapon for the Mobile Unit for large-scale disturbances of public order.
2. There is every reason to strengthen and further develop the maintenance of public order by the Mobile Unit (riot police).

The years 2020 and 2021 have been exceptional for law enforcement officers. There were more demonstrations taking place across the country than in previous years, with the police more often facing new and, in part, more organized groups. Some groups also had a more violent character. It is difficult to determine whether the violent incidents in 2020 and 2021 were actually more serious and more extensive in nature and numbers than in previous years. However, the violent Coolsingel riots in Rotterdam on November 19th, 2021, eventually led to regular police officers and riot police officers shooting at civilians (resulting in five injuries), sparking public unrest. The poignant experiences in 2020 and 2021 also gave members of the Mobile Unit the feeling that they lacked weaponry. The Coolsingel-incident of November 19th 2021 prompted police to examine whether the conclusions of previous research by the Police Academy regarding the possible introduction of one or more additional weapons for the Mobile Unit should be reconsidered.

Previous research

In 2018, the Police Academy conducted research into two possible additional weapon systems for the Mobile Unit to assist in maintaining public order. These were an air pressure weapon that can fire a single plastic projectile and a grenade launcher for firing a projectile that releases several rubber bullets. In 2018, the researchers at the Police Academy came to the conclusion that the advantages of using these non-penetrating (less than lethal, in short: less lethal) projectiles do not outweigh the disadvantages. The violence that Dutch police were confronted with in the period before 2018 in maintaining public order did not give rise to the need of such resources. Experiences abroad with less lethal weapons also gave reason to refrain from implementing them in the Dutch context. For instance, there were examples of unintentional fatal consequences caused by the single projectile and serious (eye) injuries caused by the multiple projectile.

No innovations

This new research shows that there are no relevant innovations except in targeting devices for man-made less lethal weapons. One should not have high expectations of these improved aiming devices. Even with the current modern firearms of Dutch police, more than half of aimed fired shots miss their target. Shooting with any weapon during large-scale (public) disturbances increases the chance of hitting innocent people, partly due to the unpredictable pace of the group and the numerous bystanders. Outside the category of kinetic weapons, there may be some future in means that are deployed with the help of drones, such as high-frequency sound and tear gas, for example.

Public support

On premise of this research, not much can be said about possible public support for additional less-lethal weapons for the Mobile Unit. It is clear, however, that the discussion about the legitimacy of police action and police use of force has broadened and deepened in recent years. It is therefore unlikely that the possible introduction of a less lethal weapon to be worn on the individual member of the Mobile Unit, following a few recent developments and only one isolated incident, can count on much public support.

International and historical context

As of now, non-lethal weapon systems that may be reconsidered for Dutch police are heavily criticized elsewhere in Europe and in the Western world, or have even been abolished because of the aforementioned undesirable consequences and risks. In addition, the incident on November 19, 2021 in Rotterdam is the fourth of its kind in the Netherlands in the past 56 years. For this reason, the introduction of one or more less than lethal weapons in the Netherlands now is politically and administratively illogical.

Better public order enforcement

Many respondents in this survey, including many police respondents, see good opportunities for improving public order enforcement by strengthening the information position of the police, and improving (administrative) decision-making and leadership. The respondents also advocate improving education, training and tactics, and strengthening the capacity and preparedness of the Mobile Unit personnel. This also refers to making better use of the concept of the so-called flexible Mobile Unit, which is basically an earlier, visible, but more low-key and preventive presence with a readiness to scale up. Last but not least, the respondents plead for the improvement of protective equipment and (the use of) existing less lethal means of force. It is more obvious to invest in these existing but underutilized concepts and facilities first, before exploring the possibility of additional weaponry. The Mobile Unit is under the magnifying glass of the media and public opinion. Correct preparation, equipment and management would be beneficial for them. This is a major responsibility of the police leadership, politics and public administration.

This study shows that there is no reason to equip the riot police with new less lethal weapons, but that there are good reasons to strengthen and further develop the preparation, equipment and leadership of the Mobile Unit.

Translated title of the contribution:

**Less than lethal weapons for the Mobile Unit explored:
A study into demand, (new) supply and public support**

Original language: Dutch

Number of pages: 128