

ARQ Kenniscentrum
Impact van Rampen
en Crises

The silence that followed

Long-term consequences of the Bovensmilde school hostage crisis (1977)

Summary of research report

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Summary

On May 23, 1977, four equipped Moluccan youths took the pupils and teachers present at the public primary school in Bovensmilde hostage. Almost five decades later, the consequences of the school hostage situation are still felt by a number of former pupils. This prompted the Ministry of Justice and Security to commission research into the consequences of the school hostage situation and its aftermath for those affected. This summary reflects on the background of the research, the research approach and the main findings and recommendations.

1. Background

The Dutch East Indies were colonized by the Netherlands for a long time. During the Second World War, Moluccan KNIL soldiers served alongside the Netherlands against Japan. After Indonesia gained independence, South Moluccan leaders declared the independent Republic of South Maluku (RMS) in 1950. The Indonesian government considered this an illegal secession, which led to tension and unrest. In response, the Dutch government brought 12.500 Moluccan KNIL soldiers and their families to the Netherlands in 1951. Upon arrival, the soldiers were discharged and lived in poor conditions. Disappointment and frustration among parts of the Moluccan community led to radicalization and protest actions.

During one such protest, four armed Moluccan youths took a primary school in Bovensmilde hostage. The children were released after five days, while the last teachers were freed nearly three weeks later through military intervention. Following their release, the children received medical and psychological care.

In the immediate aftermath, the hostage crisis was scarcely discussed, leaving the former hostages with little opportunity to share their experiences. Over time, however, more openness developed, and it became evident that the crisis had (very) negative effects on some of the pupils. In 2024, the Ministry of Justice and Security commissioned research to explore the long-term consequences of the hostage situation and the needs of those affected. The study is being conducted by ARQ National Psychotrauma Centre.

2. Aims and questions

This study has three objectives:

- gaining insight into the long-term consequences of the hostage situation for those affected;
- providing recommendations to the government on how to address the need for recognition and support in processing the hostage situation;
- contributing to the prevention and mitigation of psychosocial problems in the event of similar incidents in the future.

The term “those affected” refers to: pupils and teachers who were held hostage during the school hostage situation; their significant others (mostly relatives and close contacts at the time, who experienced the event up close; their current relatives and close contacts, who did not experience the hostage situation themselves or did not yet know their loved ones who were held hostage at the time); and other individuals involved, such as teachers who were not held hostage, pupils who were not held hostage, and local residents. The focus of this study is on the former hostages and their significant others.

3. Research approach

The study consisted of several components. In the preparatory phase, a *target group and field exploration* was conducted, during which key figures (representatives of the study’s target groups) were identified and approached. Through interviews, these key figures provided input on the recruitment strategy and, following the announcement of the study, assisted in informing those affected. In addition, a *contact center* was established where affected individuals and other stakeholders could call throughout the duration of the study to speak with trained care professionals about any questions or concerns. Finally, a *literature review* was conducted to serve as a foundation for the subsequent phases of the research.

The main study consisted of:

- **Surveys:** Affected individuals completed digital questionnaires aimed at gaining insight into their experiences of the school hostage crisis and its aftermath, the consequences they experienced, their experiences with care, and their current needs regarding care and recognition.
- **Interviews:** Participants were given the opportunity to share their personal stories and reflect on the meaning they attributed to these experiences.
- **Group discussions:** Groups of participants discussed statements designed to explore potential solutions to current needs for care and recognition related to the hostage crisis.

4. Participants

A total of 45 out of the 105 former pupils who had been held hostage participated in the study, along with 1 former teacher who had been held hostage, 2 teachers who had not been held hostage, 3 pupils who were sent home at the start of the hostage situation or who experienced the period from home, and 25 significant others (mostly relatives).

Not all former hostages and other affected individuals participated. To what extent the findings of the participants are representative of all those affected cannot be determined.

Former pupils

The participating former pupils had a mean age of 57 years, with men and women represented in approximately equal numbers. Most were married or living with a partner; nearly a quarter were (partially) occupationally disabled. At the time of the hostage-taking, they were between 5

and 12 years old. In total, 45 former pupils participated in the questionnaires, 34 in interviews, and 17 in group meetings.

Significant others

Of the 25 significant others, 11 were involved in the hostage-event because they lived in Bovensmilde at the time or knew someone who had been taken hostage ('significant others from then'). The other 14 entered into a relationship with, or only later came to know, someone who had been held hostage ('significant others from now'). Ten were partners of former hostages. Nine were relatives. Six were not family members. In total, 25 significant others participated in the questionnaires, 18 in interviews, and six in group meetings.

Other affected individuals

Three former teachers participated in the study. One was present at the school during the hostage situation, while the other two experienced the events outside the school. In addition to the former teachers, three former pupils participated who were sent home after the hostage-event started or did not experience the hostage situation at school. Two students were of Moluccan descent and one student lived near the school.

5. Results

Reflection on the school hostage situation and its aftermath

Former pupils

Most former pupils who were held hostage (71%) recall the school hostage crisis in an entirely negative light, while 22% describe it with mixed feelings. Their experiences were characterized by fear, tension, and powerlessness. Regarding the aftermath, they are somewhat more positive, though negative experiences still predominate. The hostage situation created divisions between community groups. Many recall a tense and threatening atmosphere in the village in the aftermath.

Significant others

The school hostage crisis had a solely negative impact on nearly half (48%) of participating significant others. Just over one-third (36%) reflect on the period with mixed—both positive and negative—feelings.

Other affected individuals

The two participating pupils of Moluccan descent described the period of the hostage crisis and its aftermath as marked by feelings of being "misunderstood." One of them later transformed this experience into a source of strength by actively advocating against the exclusion of minorities. Teachers recalled both tension and positive experiences, such as being able to support parents. A pupil from the local neighborhood described feelings of shame, regret, and frustration.

Experienced support

Former pupils

Most participating former pupils identified their family and relatives as their primary sources of support after the hostage crisis. However, only a minority felt strongly supported (29% by their immediate family, 24% by other relatives). During interviews, many pupils mentioned that people around them, including their parents, acted as if nothing had happened and avoided discussing the school hostage crisis. A culture of silence prevailed at home, at school, and in the village.

In later years, pupils often found more sources of support, such as their partner or peers with similar experiences. Some participants also drew support from engaging with the Moluccan community and learning about its history, which helped reduce feelings of resentment and misunderstanding. Of the participating former hostage pupils, 40% received professional care and 26% received guideline-recommended trauma-focused psychotherapy for mental health issues related to the hostage-taking.

Significant others

The participating significant others (n = 11) who witnessed the school hostage crisis firsthand reported that, in the aftermath, they most often received support from their own family and relatives. Other sources provided less support and the vast majority of participating significant others reported experiencing little to no support from the government, the municipality, or care providers.

Among the 11 significant others who lived in Bovensmilde at the time of the hostage crisis or already knew someone who was held hostage, one-third (36%) received professional mental health care for psychological complaints related to the hostage situation. These care experiences were generally positive. Later in life, significant others also drew support from other sources, such as distraction through work or conversations with their partner.

Other affected individuals

In the aftermath, participating teachers received support from their loved ones, care providers and colleagues. The pupil of Moluccan descent reported feeling highly supported by their immediate family, relatives, and friends, but not by other sources. The pupil who lived near the school reported feeling little to no support during the aftermath.

Long-term consequences: quality of life and mental health

Former pupils

About half (47%) of the participating former pupils who were held hostage are satisfied with their current overall quality of life, while nearly one in five (18%) are dissatisfied.

Across specific life domains, 42% reported being satisfied with their mental health, 31% reported mixed feelings, and 33% reported dissatisfaction. On average, their mental health is

lower compared to their significant others and comparable to Dutch individuals with an anxiety or mood disorder.

Over three-quarters (76%) of the participating former pupils report few to none PTSD symptoms, but nearly one-quarter (24%) show probable current (complex) PTSD, including nightmares, tension, feelings of insecurity and sleep problems. As a group, they report little post-traumatic growth, though some indicate that the experience positively influenced their career choices and engagement in society.

Significant others

Most participating significant others (80%) are satisfied with their current overall quality of life, while a small minority (4%) are dissatisfied.

Regarding mental health, 81% are satisfied, 7% report mixed feelings, and 12% are dissatisfied. A small proportion (12%) experience moderate to high stress in providing informal care to their loved one (formerly hostage).

Among the 11 significant others who experienced the hostage crisis firsthand, one reported probable complex PTSD. Several indicated that the crisis strengthened their bond with the former hostage and sometimes led to increased social engagement and community-building activities in Bovensmilde.

Other affected individuals

All participating teachers report satisfaction with their current overall quality of life. Of the two participants who experienced the hostage crisis outside the school, one is satisfied, while the other reports mixed feelings.

Teachers and the Moluccan pupil report relatively good mental health, whereas the pupil who lived near the school reports lower mental health. The hostage crisis had positive effects for some teachers and the Moluccan pupil, who noted that it helped them discover personal and professional strengths and motivated them to become more socially engaged.

Long-term consequences: functioning

Former pupils

The majority (66–73%) of participating former pupils report no negative impact of the school hostage crisis on their daily functioning. Approximately one-third (27–33%) indicate that PTSD symptoms moderately to severely affect their work capacity, social functioning, or other important areas of life.

Significant others

Among the 11 significant others who experienced the hostage crisis firsthand (relatives at the time), 73–82% report that the crisis has had no impact on their work capacity, social functioning, or other significant life domains. A minority (18–27%) report that post-traumatic symptoms moderately to severely affect these areas.

Other affected individuals

None of the participating teachers report that post-traumatic symptoms influence their functioning and the same applies to the Moluccan pupil. The pupil who experienced the crisis from the neighborhood reports a moderate to severe impact on work capacity and social functioning.

Need for support

Former pupils

The majority of participating former pupils (78%) currently have no need for professional support or are already receiving it. One in five (22%) currently does have a need for support. In most cases (80%), this need is related to the school hostage crisis and primarily involves help with processing the experience and coping with emotional complaints.

Significant others

Most participating significant others (84%) have no current need for professional support or are already receiving it. One in six (16%) currently does have a need for support. In half of these cases, this need is related to the school hostage crisis. The support sought concerns processing the personal impact of the crisis and assistance in coping with complaints experienced by their formerly hostage loved one.

Other affected individuals

None of the participating teachers, the pupil of Moluccan descent or the pupil living near the school, report a need for support.

Need for recognition and appreciation

Former pupils

Most participating former pupils (86%) feel a lack of recognition by the government. They experienced a lack of aftercare and limited involvement in processing and fostering social connections within the village. While some pupils feel recognized by the Moluccan community, others continue to carry significant pain. For instance, they find it difficult when requests are made for forgiveness on behalf of the hostage-takers.

Today, participants do not always feel acknowledged as victims of the school hostage crisis. Nearly half (47%) feel unrecognized by society and almost a third feel unacknowledged by their family and immediate social circle. The lack of recognition limited their ability to express themselves has led some to suppress their feelings. Conversely, attention and understanding created opportunities to discuss their experiences. Sharing feelings and stories provided relief and helped alleviate ongoing mental health symptoms, according to the participants.

Significant others

Many significant others (88%) feel appreciated by their loved one (formerly hostage), or by their immediate environment (76%). Most do not have a concrete need for additional recognition for

themselves. Their priority is that understanding, acceptance, and acknowledgment are shown toward the suffering of the former hostages. Recognition from the government is rarely felt.

Other affected individuals

Former teachers feel neutral or recognized by the government and society. The pupil of Moluccan descent and the one living near the school, however, do not feel recognized, particularly due to the lack of attention to their specific experiences and the impact the hostage crisis had on them.

Attitudes within and between communities

Former pupils

The majority of participating former hostage pupils (91%) do not harbor resentment toward the Moluccan community. Some participants note that the school hostage crisis involved not only perpetrators and victims, but also two misunderstood communities. Others feel that there has been insufficient recognition of the unjust treatment of the Moluccan community by the Dutch government, a stance they believe contributed to the occurrence of the school hostage crisis. Despite their generally positive attitude toward the Moluccan community, the participating pupils strongly condemn the taking of young children as hostages.

Approximately half (49–53%) are open to dialogue and/or seeking joint solutions for processing the hostage situation. A small minority are not open to this; they feel that the Moluccan community has not sufficiently expressed remorse and, at times, believe that the suffering of former hostages is not fully acknowledged.

Significant others

The majority of participating significant others are open to reconciliation: 80% are willing to engage with the Moluccan community, and 76% are open to seeking joint solutions for processing the school hostage crisis. Interviews indicate that greater expressions of remorse from the Moluccan community following the hostage crisis could have facilitated their own processing of the events. Another interviewee emphasizes that recognition is lacking for all those involved.

Other affected individuals

All participating teachers and the pupil of Moluccan descent have a positive attitude toward engaging in dialogue and seeking solutions with the various communities in Bovensmilde. Establishing contact is seen as an opportunity to foster greater mutual understanding.

6. Recommendations

Based on this study, five recommendations have been formulated in the areas of care and support, recognition, and intercommunity relations. These recommendations aim to promote recovery among those affected, who are in need of it, with attention to their diverse needs and perspectives.

1. Establish a support center for those affected

Facilitate an accessible support center where individuals can receive psychological, psychosocial and practical assistance, including referrals to specialized trauma care and peer support. Ensure long-term availability, engaged case management and explicit attention to close relatives.

2. Develop a guide for care providers and those affected

Create a practical guide containing information on the historical context, consequences of the hostage situation, and appropriate ways of engagement. This guide should be intended for professionals (such as general practitioners, mental health services, and social organizations), but also make it available to affected individuals so they can use it in conversations with care providers and relevant authorities.

3. Establish an information and remembrance center

Provide a central location with reliable information about the school hostage crisis, personal stories and educational materials. This center should contribute to public recognition and societal awareness of the event. Consider collaborating with heritage institutions and ensure structured management and maintenance.

4. Explore what governments can offer those affected

Acknowledge that aftercare at the time may have been insufficient and explore whether financial compensation is appropriate for those with persistent post-traumatic symptoms or incurred losses. Consider linking this to existing schemes, such as the Schadefonds Geweldsmisdrijven (Compensation Fund). Any compensation should be combined with public recognition and the upkeep of memorials.

5. Explore support for restorative meetings between communities

Support restorative initiatives between the Moluccan and Dutch communities for those who wish to participate. Assess interest within the Moluccan community and involve existing initiatives. Organize meetings within a restorative framework that fosters dialogue.

Acknowledge that not everyone desires reconciliation; participation should never be forced, nor should it be prevented for those who wish to engage.

7. Lessons learned

Various lessons can be drawn from this study.

1. Fatalities or physical injuries are not required for the development of chronic and severe traumatic symptoms.
2. Children are vulnerable, not only in developing symptoms, but also because they risk not being adequately seen and heard in the aftermath of a crisis.
3. Traumatic responses vary widely: some experienced the hostage-taking as exciting, others as frightening; for some it played no meaningful part in their lives, while for others it caused ongoing dysfunction across multiple life domains.
4. Time is an important factor: symptoms do not simply disappear, and recovery may take decades; even today there remains a need for support, care, and recognition.

5. Many survivors, especially former hostage pupils, suffered from the culture of silence that followed the event.
6. The impact of the hostage-taking extends beyond the hostages themselves; relatives and local residents can also develop severe mental health problems, requiring a supportive approach that addresses these wider effects.
7. Traumatic symptoms affect multiple life domains—such as family, work, and relationships—and can lead to job loss and financial problems.
8. Survivors and communities have demonstrated resilience by independently organizing gatherings, commemorations, and meetings, thereby taking agency in their recovery.
9. Support needs may change over time: immediately after a similar hostage-event the focus may be on supporting survivors and guiding parents, while later in life needs may shift towards issues related to work, education, and family life.