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How does organized crime affect students in Rotterdam and what factors influence their sense of safety?

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(Gemeente Rotterdam, 2025b)

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Abstract

This study explores how organized crime affects students in Rotterdam and which factors influence their sense of safety. This research takes a bottom-up approach by using ethnographic methods such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The interlocutors for this paper are nine students who live and study in Rotterdam.

Findings in this paper suggest that students perceive organized crime as surreal in Rotterdam. Organized crime is something that occurs in other countries and cities, rather than in their immediate surroundings. The effects of organized crime fade away quickly after they occur. Recreational drug use is normalized in student culture, and they rarely connect this to broader criminal systems, even when campaigns such as ‘Kijk jij verder dan je lijntje?’ attempt to make these links visible.

Students’ sense of safety is shaped through day-to-day factors such as drug addicts they commute past, police who arrest drug dealers, and street harassment. This affects their sense of safety more than organized crime. Public awareness campaigns appear to lack the personal relevance needed to effect behavioral change in students.

This research contributes to the ethnographic study of organized crime. It suggests a need for more targeted interventions that engage with civilians more directly in conversations about their role in urban safety.

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Introduction

‘Rotterdammers who occasionally take an XTC pill, a pinkie of MDMA or a line of coke are not so quick to link this with organized crime in our city. Your use is related to this. As a drug user you cannot ignore this. Because realize this: the 50 euros you spend on an envelope of coke ends up directly in the pocket of a criminal. A criminal who is willing to kill for his trade. Who also uses vulnerable neighborhoods as a breeding ground for his organization. Now that you know all this, do you still think a pill or line is normal?’ (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2025)

The municipality of Rotterdam has recently launched a campaign to raise awareness about drug use in relation to organized crime. They argue that citizens will change their behavior for a ‘bigger social purpose’ (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2025). However, they are not (yet) willing to contribute to this issue because they do not grasp the magnitude of the problem. In October 2024, the municipality of Rotterdam initiated a new city-wide awareness campaign titled “Kijk jij verder dan je lijntje?” (Do you look beyond your line?), aimed at confronting the normalized perception of recreational drug use. With slogans like “Haal jij je neus ervoor op?” (Do you turn your nose up at it?), the campaign highlights the a side of cocaine and XTC use. It shows that there is a connection to drug-related crime that profoundly impacts the city. Part of the campaign involved eleven well-known streets temporarily had drug-themed names (such as “Cokesingel” and “West-Snuifkade”) to make the effects of drug use tangible and unavoidable in public spaces (Gemeente Rotterdam Persberichten, 2024). The campaign also includes social media videos targeting young people. They showed how casual drug use at parties can lead to violence, and involvement in organized crime. Their main message is: behind every “high” lies someone else’s “low.” The municipality aims to spark conversation among young people about the societal consequences of their choices (Gemeente Rotterdam Persberichten, 2024).

Previous studies indicate that Rotterdam plays a significant role in the global drug trade. Areas like Rotterdam Zuid emerge as centers for organized crime and this has consequences for the neighborhood (Roks et al., 2020; Schram et al., 2018). However, much of this research adopts a top-down approach, concentrating on large criminal networks, policy measures, or extreme cases of drug trade involvement. It is often neglected how ordinary citizens, especially students, perceive and experience these issues in their surroundings, and if they are aware of the impact they can have. While recreational drug use has become more commonplace, its impact on neighborhoods is becoming harder to overlook (Bureau Bervoets, 2021; Dertadian, 2023; Kleemans & van de Bunt, 1999; Tops et al., 2018; Schram et al., 2018). This gap in the research highlights the need for a bottom-up perspective that focuses on students' experiences. Raising awareness through these viewpoints may be an essential initial step in tackling and potentially reducing recreational drug use (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2024).

This paper addresses the research question: How does organized crime affect students in Rotterdam, and what factors influence their sense of safety? To explore this, I am using ethnographic research methods, including semi-structured interviews and observations. My goal is to understand how students experience the presence of organized crime in their daily lives. And what actors shape their sense of safety. My hypothesis is that students are aware of organized crime through newsarticles, videos and public campaigns, such as the campaign by the municipality of Rotterdam. But they often do not connect the events in the news to their own environment or behavior. They underestimate the scale of the issue and show little willingness report suspicious activity, for example. Regarding their sense of safety, police presence and a sense of community around them will be seen as important. But the influence they experience from other actors remains limited.

The following chapter will present a literature review. I have identified four ways to examine how organized crime affects students in Rotterdam and what factors influence their sense of safety. Firstly, I will analyze Rotterdam's role in the international drug market, which explains how drugs shape the city. Secondly, we will explore the policies being pursued in the Netherlands and how they differ from those in other countries. Subsequently, we will review different ethnographic studies from other countries and how those perspectives look at this subject. Thereafter, I will delve deeper into the literature regarding the effects of the drug market on the citizens of Rotterdam, such as “*ondermijning*.” Finally, I will highlight a gap in the existing research that this paper aims to address. After this literature review, I will elaborate on the design of my research. Followed by the results and discussion. Finally, I will share my conclusion and recommendations for further research.

Literature Review

Role of Rotterdam in the drug market

The Netherlands plays a crucial role in the global drug market. The Dutch international trading routes are exploited by criminal networks. Drugs are transported and traded on a global scale (Vermeulen et al., 2024). However, the functions of criminal organizations vary across regions, influenced by each country's political system. Criminal groups can assume state-like roles, such as providing protection. They leverage existing infrastructures for their trade in countries with a stable economy and government, like the Netherlands (Paoli, 2014). The Netherlands is a major player in the production and trade of synthetic drugs. Dutch criminals maintain networks and business operations worldwide. Drug crime in the Netherlands is predominantly linked to domestic drug production, fueling a billion-euro market that operates as a shadow economy in its own right (Tops et al., 2018; Vermeulen et al., 2024).

Criminal organizations exploit logistical infrastructures in Europe for drug transportation, such as cocaine. They utilize ports throughout Europe for their trade. The port of Rotterdam, the largest harbor in Europe, serves as a gateway to the rest of the continent. Profits for these international organizations in the Netherlands come from trafficking illegal goods. International organized crime in the Netherlands is characterized by 'transit criminality'. (Eventon & Bewley-Taylor, 2016; Paoli, 2014; Roks et al., 2020; Vermeulen et al., 2024). Transit criminality are criminal activities associated with the transport of illegal goods. Although the emphasis in the source by Roks et al. (2020) is on the import of cocaine via the port of Rotterdam, this indicates that some of the imported drugs are further transported to other destinations, which amounts to transit crime.

Policy on drugs

The municipality of Rotterdam is currently trying to involve its citizens in its battle against organized crime. This aligns with the idea by Sorell (2018) that it is necessary to have public participation to counter organized crime effectively. The next section will examine the types of policies being enforced, as these shape how citizens perceive drug use.

Their decision-making process is based on various factors. Consider one's personal circumstances, their environment, and governmental policy (Coumans et al., 2006; Friedman et al., 2019; Lub & De Leeuw, 2016). This will be emphasized in the following passage. Drug crimes appear easy to police and legislate against because it is not difficult to conceptualize and draft legislation for them. However, making it effective is challenging. The harm from this type of crime is not as objective and logical as it may seem. Federal governments and municipalities must constantly assess whether their approach is too repressive or progressive (Sorell, 2018).

The Dutch drug policy is well-known for its liberal standpoint, focusing on harm reduction. Drug offenses in the Netherlands include production, trade, and possession. The Dutch approach differentiates between soft drugs, such as cannabis, and harder drugs, placing a priority on public health while addressing international trafficking. Law enforcement does not primarily target drug use, permitting prosecutors to decide against pursuing charges if it benefits the public. The policy encompasses methadone maintenance programs, user rooms, and day care facilities (Coumans et al., 2006; van de Mheen & Gruther, 2004). However, local authorities and citizens aim for stronger enforcement. But this often isolates chronic drug users further from society. Instead of resolving the issue, the negative effects of these addicts are often displaced through area bans. Police express concerns that this negatively impacts drug quality and complicates enforcement due to the issue's widespread nature (Coumans et al., 2006).

Rotterdam is widely recognized for its progressive municipal drug policy, “Veilig en Schoon,” which prioritizes public health and aims to reduce urban drug-related nuisance. The city has two strategies. They combine strict enforcement, for example, shutting down drug-dealing spots, and they facilitate tolerant and regulatory practices, such as supervised consumption rooms, prosecutorial discretion, and quality-based self-regulation among dealers. ‘This balanced approach between harm reduction and social control has positioned Rotterdam as a significant case study in European drug policy literature’ (van Mheen & Gruther, 2004). However, research conducted by Bureau Bervoets (2021) in Gouda (near Rotterdam) has led to the following policy recommendations: a comprehensive approach that incorporates support services, denormalization, prevention, and law enforcement. Along with increased oversight and control, young respondents emphasized the importance of encouraging conversations in family and school contexts. It also stressed the necessity of current data on drug-related incidents to allow for more focused policing.

Ethnography on Drug trade and drug use

Ethnography is well-suited to address the research question of this paper. It emphasizes lived experience and the social context in which people make decisions. Existing ethnographic research on organized crime, drug use, and feelings of safety highlight different aspects of drug use and the social context. They suggest that drug-related phenomena are complex and that many factors influence how they manifest in people's lives. Personal choices, social structures, and governmental policies all impact these decisions (Carvalho & Soares, 2016; Friedman et al., 2019; Coumans et al., 2006; Lub & De Leeuw, 2016; Van Schipstal et al., 2016; Dertadian, 2023; Moore, 2004).

However, when examining drug use, people often use drugs for amusement (Bureau Bervoets, 2021; Dertadian, 2023; van Schipstal et al., 2016). Gemeente Rotterdam Persberichten (2024) states that drug use among the youth is becoming normalized. They do not tie drug use to

criminal behavior. Additionally, Dertadian (2023) explains that drug use has become normalized among young people in developed capitalist nations. Instead of being viewed solely as part of subculture or criminality, it is now seen as standard practice (Dertadian, 2023). Recreational drug users are now adopting strategies to mitigate risks associated with drug use. They measure their doses carefully and establish secure and enjoyable environments for experimentation. Furthermore, they utilize online forums as platforms to exchange information and alert one another to potential hazards. Today, recreational drug users actively manage dangers rather than merely enduring them (Bureau Bervoets, 2021; van Schipstal et al., 2016). Despite the increasing normalization of drug use, the public perception still predominantly focuses on marginalized 'street addicts,' who are often grouped in certain urban areas and share comparable socioeconomic backgrounds (Moore, 2004).

'Ondermijning' and other effects for citizens

This section aims to understand the effects of the drug market in the Netherlands. Organized drug-related crime does not operate in a social vacuum. Family ties and friendships are often the basis for criminal drug-related organizations. This is seen as a snowball effect; someone enters and brings in people from his environment. People are often seen as replaceable and criminal networks adapt quickly after arrests (Kleemans & van de Blunt; 1999). This illustrates the potential for social embeddedness of criminal organizations within a neighborhood.

'Ondermijning' refers to the impact of organized crime groups on society. Criminals exploit legal businesses to launder money, creating links between the criminal underworld and our community. One example is the youth involved in drug dealing at schools, or professionals whose legitimate workplaces also serve criminal enterprises (van Kolthoff & Khonraad, 2016). Criminal organizations often target developing areas, such as Rotterdam Zuid. A more problematic part of Rotterdam. Some neighborhoods have become notorious for crimes like

drug trafficking, illegal cannabis plantations, money laundering, and prostitution. Many residents do not have access to stable employment, and financial resources, often living in substandard housing. This increases their vulnerability to crime through insecurity. These interconnected problems affect one another, creating a cycle that is difficult to escape. The criminal underworld is so intertwined in these neighborhoods that avoiding it becomes nearly impossible (Schram et al., 2018). This highlights the systemic nature of the issues in Rotterdam Zuid and illustrates how organized crime is intertwined with everyday life (Bureau Bervoets, 2021; Lub & De Leeuw, 2016; Schram et al., 2018). Criminal organizations affect society and neighborhoods in Rotterdam, they potential endanger issues such a loss of confidence in local and governmental institutions (Kleemans & van de Bunt, 1999; Tops et al., 2018).

Synthesis

These perspectives illustrate that drug use and criminal organizations are intricate issues influenced by socioeconomic factors, local laws, and user considerations. Ethnography is the primary discipline for examining this concept (Moore, 2004; van Schipstal et al., 2016). Most articles on drug trafficking concentrate on the logistics of drug transport, often neglecting the dynamics within cities and neighborhoods. They tend to overlook the impact of citizens and primarily adopt a top-down perspective, failing to explore how legislation can mobilize community action. While others explore how people get involved in drug trade and its effects on the daily lives of ordinary citizens, they rarely address whether citizens or students feel a sense of responsibility for organized crime or if they are inclined to alter their behaviors. Ethnography offers an approach to research these issues, yet articles on the repercussions of drug trade tend to be mainly descriptive. Although they offer some policy suggestions, they are still largely informative without delving into the effect that individuals are able to have.

Research Design and Methods

The literature review leads to the following research question: ‘How does organized crime impact students in Rotterdam, and which factors influence their sense of safety?’. This paper aims to address the existing gap in the literature by engaging with students in Rotterdam about the consequences they experience in their neighbourhoods and whether these consequences affect their behaviour. Additionally, it examines how normalized drug use (Dertadian, 2023, Gemeente Rotterdam Persberichten, 2024) is influenced by the adverse effects of organized crime on the city. I will conduct ethnographic research with students to gain insight into their perceptions of the issues in the city. Moreover, which actors affect their perception of organized crime in Rotterdam, aiming to understand how and if they are willing to adapt their behaviour. These insights are unique to qualitative research, primarily ethnographic in nature. This kind of in-depth data cannot be retrieved from quantitative research (Lub & de Leeuw, 2016)

Ethnography allows for this by emphasizing lived experience, local knowledge, and social context. Through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, I aim to uncover how students perceive safety. And how they experience institutions such as the police or the municipality. The aim of these conversations with the interlocutor is also to determine if the presence of organized crime influences their behavior. These insights cannot be fully captured through surveys or statistical reports alone. As Lub & De Leeuw (2016) have shown, qualitative methods can produce sharper and more concrete insights on how citizens experience safety. It also illustrates how these perceptions vary across different contexts. Ethnography enables me to understand this issue, although it is complex.

Data Collection

For my research, I have acquired nine interlocutors. Four of them are male, and five are female, aged 20-22. I chose this age range because they have already been students for a few years and

are currently still studying. This helps me to get rich data because they are in direct contact with other students who might use drugs. Young people, such as students, have been the target of the campaign by Gemeente Rotterdam (2024). When talking to students, I have noticed that it has been normalized to take drugs once in a while. This makes students an interesting group to look at for this paper. My interlocutors are all members of a student association in Rotterdam and currently live in Rotterdam. My interlocutors live in different neighborhoods of the city. The majority currently lives in Rotterdam Noord, which is a relatively calm part of the city with less nuisance of drug users and drug criminality. However, almost all of them have lived in more problematic parts of the city before moving to Rotterdam Noord. Some of them are doing studies in the field of security, but most of them are studying something unrelated. My group has a small over-representation of students in the field of security.

The sample strategy I used was a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. First, I approached three students asking them to participate in my research. I reached out to them because I had briefly spoken to them about the subject before, and I knew I could get rich, relevant data from them. I tried to have approximately the same number of male and female interlocutors. The interlocutors I had reached out to asked some of their friends if they wanted to participate as well. This makes a combination of purposive and snowball sampling.

For this research, I have spoken to my interlocutors in the building of their student association. This building has some spare rooms that we were able to use. This was useful because my interlocutors were in a building that they were familiar with. I hoped that this would lead to a comfortable, yet neutral and private place to speak to them. All of them live in shared houses with roommates who might be present. Whilst we could not be interrupted in the room we went to. I asked if I could meet them at their house before biking to the building where the student association is located. This was to see where they live, because many of them indicated during the interviews that they primarily feel insecure when being outside. And to see if they live in or

cross problematic neighborhoods as described by Roks et al. (2020) and Schram et al. (2018). This would support my understanding of their story when I spoke with them during the interview.

I collected my data through semi-structured interviews and by spending time with my interlocutors, observing them during our bike rides. During the bike rides, we chatted about various aspects of our lives. I did not follow a script during these bike rides. My goal was to observe our surroundings and to make the interlocutor comfortable speaking to me, so my role was both observer and participant of the conversation. These bike rides lasted approximately ten minutes. With some of them, I have spoken about people we crossed who seemed under the influence of alcohol or drugs. I took notes on these rides after we arrived at the student association building. I made some notes while grabbing us a drink to ensure that the interlocutor would not have to wait for me. I mentioned that I made notes when we started the interview to ensure that they know what sorts of data I gather from them. I wrote some things down about how comfortable they drove through the city and some things that stood out to me and could be relevant in my research. For example, when we drove past a homeless shelter or an infamous drug dealer's spot.

The interviews I did were semi-structured. I made a script for my interviews (see Appendix A). This serves as a guide to ensure that I have covered all the subjects I wanted to discuss. The interviews were in Dutch to ensure that the interlocutors would feel most comfortable and were able to express themselves as clearly as possible. I have translated the script and quotes I will be using further in this paper. The themes I wanted to touch upon during the interviews are: safety and perception of crime; drug use among students; experiences of organized crime in daily life; *ondermijning*; campaigns and awareness; image and stereotyping; and actors and safety. I have developed a few guiding questions that I can fall back on. They served as guidance, but I have discussed the matter further with the interlocutor based on what they said.

I took some notes during the interview and recorded it. The analysis is done using thematic coding. I have written down the codes in my transcript and selected quotes I wanted to use. I began by focusing on the themes I had identified when drafting my questions. These built up to the answer to my research question (see appendix C).

Considerations

The interlocutors have signed an informed consent form (Appendix B). This ensures their anonymity and confidentiality. They will be anonymized in this paper. I have anonymized them when I saved my notes and recordings of the interviews. I saved the recordings on my phone and will delete them after I've passed the thesis (or after the resit deadline). I will save the notes of the observations and interviews on my laptop (not in the cloud). As this device is password-protected. They will be referred to as interlocutor 1, interlocutor 2, etc., when I quote in this paper. Furthermore, their data will be stored. I will not discuss with anyone what they have told me. This is part of the confidentiality. We discussed drug use and safety. These are sensitive subjects, but not punishable in the Netherlands. However, due to the sensitive nature of the subject, I will minimize the risk of harm by anonymizing the subjects in my paper and data storage. This goes further than changing their names. However, I also leave out things that could lead to recognition by other students, such as the name of the student association they are part of. I have submitted an ethical approval form, which has been approved by the academic staff at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs of Universiteit Leiden.

Results and Discussion

Results

As established in the literature, Rotterdam is important in the global drug trade, with areas like Rotterdam Zuid emerging as hotspots for organized crime. Whilst this has its repercussions in the citizens living in the area (Roks et al., 2020; Schram et al., 2018). Much of the current research uses a top-down perspective. They are concentrating on criminal organizations, policy issues, or instances of direct involvement (the ways people directly engage in the drug trade, for example). What remains inadequately addressed is how citizens, particularly students, comprehend these issues. Moreover, how they handle them within their own neighborhoods and social contexts. Drug use has become normalized. However, its impact on communities is unmistakable (Bureau Bervoets, 2021; Dertadian, 2023; Kleemans & van de Bunt, 1999; Tops et al., 2018; Schram et al., 2018). This paper examines how students perceive organized crime and its impact on their lives. I have also spoken with them about the factors that influence their sense of safety and whether they feel that they contribute to the matter. We will start by focusing on students' perceptions of organized crime.

Students view organized crime as something abstract, that is happening underground. They do not directly associate organized crime with events in Rotterdam: “When I think of organized crime, the crime surrounding the drug trade comes to mind and liquidations that take place around it or large mafia groups, but in my opinion that is mainly a thing abroad than here in Rotterdam” (interlocutor 2, personal communication, May 8, 2025). An interlocutor even described it as “a Netflix series, not something knocking on my front door” (interlocutor 6, personal communication, May 13, 2025). This suggests that the term 'organized crime' is not recognized by the interlocutors in Rotterdam.

The interlocutors become aware of organized crime through news reports and social media primarily. Incidents such as explosions in neighborhoods like Delfshaven or Rotterdam Zuid

are often linked to drug trafficking. Which seems to contradict their earlier statements regarding organized crime. However, these incidents cause some unease but rarely lead to fear or a change in daily behavior. They read those news articles more as entertainment than a lived reality. The interlocutors acknowledge that things are happening in their neighborhoods, interlocutor 9 states:

Well, I think I mainly sit and watch it with my housemate, every now and then. Oh, in our neighborhood, someone is missing again, or someone has been stabbed again, or someone has been shot, or there has been an explosion? And then we talk about it, and I later forget about it. (personal communication, May 16, 2025)

While drug use among students is often seen as relatively standard and widespread in some circles, many do not connect their (recreational) drug use to organized crime. Only after reflecting or through campaigns do they realize the pill they take is part of something much bigger and involves many more people and harmful things. Campaigns like “Kijk jij verder dan je lijntje?” are considered helpful in raising awareness about this link. However, opinions on their effectiveness in changing behavior vary. Some students believe that direct contact and personal stories have a more significant impact than campaigns.

The concept of ‘ondermijning’, which refers to criminals using legal structures (van Kolthoff & Khonraad, 2016), is not widely known among all students. Those familiar with it suspect it occurs in Rotterdam, for example, through shops with few customers or shisha lounges. Importantly, they expect that students may be vulnerable to becoming involved in organized crime, mainly due to financial struggles and the search for “quick-cash” jobs. Examples mentioned include courier services for documents. “Students can be a vulnerable group, precisely because they are in need of money and can therefore easily be persuaded to become money mules, for example.” (Interlocutor 1, personal communication, May 8, 2025) This represents a potential direct influence of organized crime on students.

We will now discuss the factors that influence the perceived safety of my interlocutors, we will start by examining actors that have a positive effect on their sense of safety. Many of the interlocutors indicate that they experience that the police contribute to their sense of safety. They say that the police combat the nuisance of addicts and dealers. They are happy with the way the police are handling organized crime. They primarily describe that they are happy with repressive measures, as Sorell (2018) mentioned.

A few weeks ago, a policeman in civilian clothes showed up at my doorstep. He proceeded to enter and asked if he could use my window to coordinate arrests on my street. He was handing out orders before I knew it, and within an hour, about six dealers were arrested. I knew that there were many dealers, but I am glad that the police is on top of it. (Interlocutor 5, personal communication, May 16, 2025)

Another factor that contributes to a sense of safety for the interlocutors is their social network. This ranges from fellow students to friends and housemates. This is experienced as the most important factor, especially for the female interlocutors. Biking or walking home together, sharing live locations, and letting each other know when they have arrived home safely all strongly contribute to feeling safe, especially in the evenings. The presence of others on the streets, the idea that someone could intervene if something happens, and neighbors watching out for each other (e.g., via WhatsApp groups) are viewed as positive. “Friendly people on the street” (interlocutor 7, personal communication, May 14, 2025) also contribute to this sense of well-being. Well-lit streets and surveillance cameras are mentioned. The interlocutors explain that their peak sense of unsafety occurs when it is dark. When asking about this, it seems to stem from a fear of being harassed. And that they are not afraid to accidentally become involved or victimized because of organized crime or drug-related violence. This attributes to the earlier sense that the interlocutors do not sense organized crime as something close to home.

Factors that negatively impact the sense of safety of the interlocutors can be specific locations and times. Students feel less safe in places such as Eendrachtsplein, Blaak and parts of Rotterdam Zuid and West. They explain that this feeling grows at night when it is quieter or darker. The male and female interlocutors describe these moments equally as “threatening and uncomfortable” (Interlocutor 2, personal communication, May 8, 2025). They also describe that the presence of homeless people, drunk individuals, or “junkies” on the street, especially around Eendrachtsplein, are causing discomfort or feelings of unsafety, sometimes due to harassment or threats. Groups of guys that are hanging around, also reduce the feeling of safety. These contributing factors do not tie directly back to organized crime either. When I asked about their sense of safety when filtering on the effects of organized crime, such as violence, in response to these stories, it did not resonate. They explained that organized crime, at least the drug trade, facilitates these cases because “most of the people that cause harm or harassment at night are homeless and addicted” (Interlocutor 5, personal communication, May 13, 2025).

When discussing drug use, the same assumption arises again. Every interlocutor uses or knows people who use drugs for recreational purposes. The interlocutor 7 explains that they “have a responsible way of using drugs. We research before trying a new drug using Google or by talking to friends with experience. And we get our supply from a friend of a friend. Not some aggressive dealer.” (personal communication, May 14, 2025). By doing so, they argue that no harm is done. When we looked at the campaigns of Gemeente Rotterdam (2024), they started to shift slightly and became somewhat uncomfortable. However, did not wholeheartedly agree that he contributes to the existence of organized crime.

In order to see where the interlocutors live and commute. Additionally, to get to know them a bit before we started the interviews, I rode the bike with them to the student association building, where the interviews took place. I drove past Eendrachtsplein with several interlocutors. Several people were smoking a hard drug in the middle of the day at that square.

Every time I came past. This issue is something that my interlocutors face on a daily basis. The neighborhoods that most interlocutors lived in were almost village-like. Many young children were on the streets or playing in the park with their parents. It seems almost logical that most of them do not see organized crime as a direct threat to them. They see the headlines, but this is not within a kilometer radius of their houses, so they do not worry. Some interlocutors live in neighborhoods with dilapidated green areas, budget supermarkets on the street corner, and visibly unkempt men wandering around the neighborhood. They explained more about organized crime in their community. Nevertheless, did they not seem phased when discussing the subject.

In summary, organized crime mainly affects students indirectly through news reports of violence and incidents, and through the vague awareness of broader societal issues like undermining, and the link between drug use and crime. They recognize that the direct impact lies more in the potential for involvement driven by financial need. Students' sense of safety is shaped by a mix of visible actors such as the police, peers, and certain groups. And by location and time, personal experiences, and shared stories within their social network. There is little understanding that organized crime is affecting people from all layers of society and in their neighborhoods.

Discussion

This study examined the impact of organized crime on students in Rotterdam and the factors that influence their sense of safety. Previous studies indicate that Rotterdam plays a significant role in the global drug trade. (Roks et al., 2020; Schram et al., 2018). Ordinary citizens are affected by organized crime because young people get involved in the organizations, and acts of violence occur on the streets. However, most people are unaware of the impact they can have in tackling these issues. In this paper, we have investigated how citizens of Rotterdam are

affected by organized crime according to existing literature, and we performed ethnographic research to uncover how students are affected by organized crime.

Literature indicates that the Netherlands plays a crucial role in the global drug market. Criminal organizations are using existing infrastructure to transport drugs throughout Europe (Eventon & Bewley-Taylor, 2016; Paoli, 2004; Roks et al., 2020; Tops et al., 2018; Vermeulen et al., 2024). The use of this existing infrastructure can be seen as ‘ondermijning’ (van Kolthoff & Khonraad, 2016). Criminal organizations are rooted in specific neighborhoods of Rotterdam. Families and friends often form the basis for criminal organizations, which further consolidate these roots (Bureau Bervoets, 2021; Lub & De Leeuw, 2016; Schram et al., 2018). The municipality of Rotterdam is attempting to engage its citizens in the fight against organized crime by promoting the idea that public participation is essential (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2024). Recreational drug use is being normalized and has lost its tie to criminal behavior in the public eye (Dertadian, 2023). The Netherlands employs a liberal stance in the debate about drug use. In contrast, the public wants them to take up more repressive measures, even though they might be ineffective in the long term (Coumans et al., 2006; van de Mheen & Gruther, 2004).

There is a gap in research on whether citizens or students feel connected to the effects of organized crime and/or are willing to change their behavior to counteract it. This article aims to fill this gap by exploring the experiences of students in Rotterdam using ethnographic research. This shows that organized crime mainly affects students indirectly through news reports of violence and incidents, and through the vague awareness of broader societal issues like undermining, and the link between drug use and crime. They understand that they are at risk of being directly involved in organized crime through their financial needs. Students’ sense of safety is shaped by a mix of visible actors such as the police, peers, and certain groups. And by location and time, personal experiences, and shared stories within their social network. There is some understanding of the magnitude of the issue that organized crime poses. Students,

however, do not see past the issues that they believe to be the biggest threat to their sense of security. The current effects of organized crime are the status quo for students, and they live with it. Therefore, it is difficult for them to link recreational usage to involvement in organized crime.

Limitations and implications

This section will address the implications, contextual boundaries, and limitations of this paper to ensure that the results can be interpreted correctly. As a student, I regularly reflected on my own biases and my role with participants. I am friends with three of my interlocutors. These were the first interlocutors I spoke to, so it was easy to start with them. However, I had to be careful not to assume anything, as it is essential to discuss everything and not just assume what lies behind their answers, since I know them. However, I have discussed this with them before we started the interview. We tried to do this in such a way that we do not expect each other to know more than what we said. I gathered the other interlocutors by snowball sampling. I did not know them personally, but it is possible that they did not discuss everything they experienced openly. I assured confidentiality at the start of the interview, but I am concerned that this may be a limitation of my research. Another bias I have had as a researcher is concerning men in my research. As a woman, this perspective influences my views on men and my perceived safety. The questions I asked and my discomfort with men may have led to less complete data from my male interlocutors. I am schooled in the field of safety and security, which makes me highly interested in the matter that I am researching. This sometimes led to a gap with my interlocutor because they did not have the same background knowledge as I do. I discussed these reflections with peers along the way. This helped me stay self-aware and critical of my position during the interview.

Other constraints of my research are time constraints. This paper is part of a thesis course, which provided a limited timeframe for conducting all the research. This has led to purposive and snowball sampling. This limits the replicability and generalizability of the research. Furthermore, I have employed ethnography in writing this paper. Ethnography is excellent at collecting in-depth data. This gives us insights that we would not have been able to gather otherwise. However, a drawback of this type of research is its limited generalizability. Because of the social embeddedness and broad terminology of organized crime, my interlocutors experienced difficulty explaining when they felt unsafe due to organized crime or just felt unsafe. Loitering youth can be seen as a side effect of organized crime or puberty. This distinction was difficult to assess. I aimed to keep it open to interpretation to gauge the views of interlocutors associated with organized crime and to determine if they felt affected by it. This decision might have led to more divergent data than desired.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how organized crime affects students in Rotterdam and identify the factors that influence their sense of safety. While previous research confirms Rotterdam's key position in the international drug trade, it rarely addresses how students experience or respond to this reality. Much of the public remains unaware of how normalized behavior such as recreational drug use, is connected to larger criminal systems.

The literature review addresses that socio-economic factors and legislation affect drug use and organized crime, and that the Netherlands, especially Rotterdam, is a hotspot for organized crime. This gives the impression that the adverse effects of organized crime are almost undeniable. Especially when zooming in on articles written by Bureau Bervoets (2021), Kleemans & van de Bunt (1999), Tops et al. (2018), and Schram et al. (2018), it seems that everyone is experiencing the effects of organized crime in their neighborhoods. Criminal organizations use legal structures to facilitate their operations, a process known as *ondermijning*. These groups are often rooted in local communities, sustained by social and familial ties in vulnerable environments. Despite the municipality's efforts to involve the public in prevention, including awareness campaigns, citizens (in this case, students) still struggle to see their role in addressing the issue.

Findings suggest that students are mostly affected in indirect ways: through news, social media, and occasional neighborhood incidents. Drug use is largely normalized in their social circles, and many do not feel personally involved in the criminal networks that supply these substances. Although some recognize the broader harm linked to recreational drug use, most do not view their actions, nor the actions of their friends, as contributing to the problem.

Students' sense of safety appears to be shaped more by day-to-day experiences, which can have a positive and negative impact. Passing drug users every day and the fear of being harassed at

night negatively affect their sense of safety. But they still have trust in the police organization to counter this, even though some are aware of ‘ondermijning’. While there is a growing awareness of criminal activity in the city through campaigns by the Rotterdam municipality, it remains abstract to many.

Overall, organized crime is embedded in the society in which students are, but it is not perceived as a direct threat. Their sense of safety is determined by what they see each day, rather than what they read in the newspapers.

Future research should randomly select students to conduct interviews, thereby obtaining a more generalizable sample. This remains an implication of ethnography; however, the limited time available to gather a sample of people made this difficult in this paper. Furthermore, future researchers should aim to select a sample that is not related to them in any way. This helps to ensure that interlocutors discuss everything openly. In addition, future studies should critically assess the effectiveness of current awareness campaigns. While campaigns such as “*Kijk jij verder dan je lijntje?*” succeed in generating attention, they often fail to produce behavioral change among students. Researchers should explore alternative, more personal forms of engagement that directly link recreational drug use to organized crime in a way that resonates with young people. Moreover, the findings of this paper show that students often disconnect their behavior from its broader consequences. This suggests a need to investigate how moral and cognitive gaps influence public participation in tackling organized crime. Finally, future studies should also aim to draw this research to a broader audience than students alone. Focus on people from Rotterdam Zuid, for example, who are directly affected by organized crime, and on a group that is indirectly affected, to see the different perceptions of the issue.

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Appendix A: Interview Script

The following interview questions were initially asked in Dutch. This is the English translation of the semi-structured interview guide used during fieldwork.

Interview script

Research Question: How does organized crime affect students in Rotterdam and what actors influence their sense of safety?’

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I conduct research into the effects of organized crime on students in Rotterdam, and how that relates to their sense of safety. First of all, I want to say that there are no right or wrong answers. I am just curious about your experiences and perspective. Everything is processed anonymously. If you don't want to answer something, that's okay.

First, I have an informed consent form, and I will walk you through this, and you can sign if you agree.

Ready to get started?

1. Safety and perception of crime

- How safe do you feel in Rotterdam, and why?
- Do you notice any organized crime in the city in your daily life?
- Would you say that organized crime affects your life or the lives of other students?

2. Drug use among students

- What is your view on drug use among students?
- Do you have experience with drug use yourself, or do you know people who use?
- Are there any resources you would or would not use? If so, where is your limit, and why there?

- Do you do your own research before trying anything? If so, how? Where do you get information from?

3. Experiences of organized crime in daily life

- What is the first thing that comes up when you think about organized crime?
- How do you feel about organized crime (feels far/near you)?
- What are the first things you think of when looking at bombings in Rotterdam?
- Would you say that Rotterdam is in a crisis due to drugs and its effects?

4. Ondernijning

- Do you know what ‘ondernijning’ is, and how would you explain it?
- What are examples of ‘ondernijning in Rotterdam?
- Would you think students could be (subconsciously) involved in organized crime? If so, how?

5. Campaigns and awareness

- Have you ever seen a campaign such as ‘kijk jij verder dan je lijntje?’ -> Proceed by showing some of the campaign posts and a video.
- Would a campaign as such affect your view on organized crime and your (or your fellow students’) contribution?

6. Image & stereotyping

- When you think of someone using drugs, could you describe the kind of person you picture?
- Do you think drug use affects your reputation?

7. Actors and safety

- What actors contribute to your sense of safety in Rotterdam?
- Do you trust the government or municipality to deal with organized crime?

Conclusion

That's it! Thank you for your time and everything you have said. Do you have anything you would like to talk to me about for this topic before we leave?

If not, thank you again!

Appendix B: Interview Consent Form for Interviews

INFORMATION SHEET

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if you have any further questions.

What is the purpose of this study?

This project forms part of the Bachelor's in Security Studies (BaSS) thesis at Leiden University. This project explores the ethnography of crises. Specifically how organized crime affects students in Rotterdam and what actors influence their sense of safety.

Who is organising the research?

The research is part of the BSc Security Studies (BaSS) programme's Thesis Course. This research is being organised by 3rd year BaSS student: Daniëlle Dorrestijn: d.b.dorrestijn@umail.leidenuniv.nl. For more information about the course/assignment, please contact the Thesis supervisor, Dr Chelsie André: c.j.andre@fgga.leidenuniv.nl or the Thesis Coordinator, Dr Ramesh Ganohariti: bass.thesis@fgga.leidenuniv.nl.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part is voluntary. You may decide to take part, or to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview.

What will the interview involve?

Your participation involves an in-person meeting with the researcher(s) of this study. The discussion will focus on questions surrounding issues of organized crime in Rotterdam and recreational drug use. We will ask you to share your thoughts, experiences, and opinions on the provided topics or questions.

With your permission, the conversation may be audio recorded to ensure we capture your views and experiences accurately. If recorded, the interview will be transcribed, pseudonymised (removing any identifying information), and stored securely in a password-protected environment. The transcript will be used exclusively for this study. The audio recording will be deleted soon after the transcript has been finalised. If you do not wish for the interview to be recorded, please inform the researcher, and they will take notes instead.

What are the pros and cons of taking part?

There are no known risks associated with participating in this research. This said, your participation will contribute to the advancement of knowledge in ethnography. While there are no direct benefits to you, your insights may help improve the perceived safety of students in Rotterdam. ___

If at any point you feel uncomfortable, you are free to pause the interview, to end it, or to reschedule. If you feel affected, uncomfortable, or sad after the interview, we suggest that you talk to people you trust or confidentially to an unknown, supportive person.

Telefoon: 0900-1450 op werkdagen van 9.00 tot 21.00 uur

E-mail: vraag@korrelatie.nl

Chat: mindkorrelatie.nl op werkdagen van 9.00 tot 20.30 uur

Whatsapp: 06-13 86 38 03 op werkdagen van 9.00 tot 17.30 uur

If you tell the researcher something that makes them concerned about your own and/or others' wellbeing, they will contact a national hotline, which will, as appropriate, refer you to local authorities to provide you with further assistance.

Will my name appear in the study?

No. Your name will not appear in any of the study's publications or presentations, if we use short quotations from your interview, we will use a pseudonym.

How will data be kept safe?

This study is GDPR compliant. It is designed to ensure that everything you share will be stored securely in a password-protected environment. Your personal information will only be available to the researcher. Any information which can potentially be linked to you will not be included in the transcript. To safeguard your rights, we have procedures in place that ensure that we use the minimum of personally identifiable information possible. Leiden University will act as the data controller. For further general information about Leiden University's use of personal information as a participant in a research study, please see: <https://blogs.library.leiden.edu/qualtrics/en/protecting-personal-data-in-scientific-research/>

What will happen to the study data and the results?

Pseudonymised results from individuals may be used as part of the Bachelor’s thesis project (2024). The pseudonymised results and transcript will be made available to the instructors who will grade the Thesis.

Informed consent

After the researcher has talked you through this information sheet and responded to any questions, the researcher will ask you if you consent to participate in this interview, and record your response.

	Tick Box
I confirm that I have understood the study, its purpose and how the research will be carried out. I had an opportunity to ask questions, which were answered to my satisfaction.	
I understand that I will be able to withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason. I understand that I can request that any personal data (or information) provided be deleted.	
I understand that the data gathered will be used anonymously and securely. It will not be possible to identify me in any written outputs.	

I understand that I will not benefit financially from participating in this study.	
I understand that the transcripts will be solely available to the researchers undertaking this study and the course instructors who will evaluate this study.	
I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.	

Participant's Name (Print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Codebook

Code No.	Theme	Definition	Relevance to Research Question	Sources/Literature
1	Sense of Safety in Rotterdam	The experience of safety among students in the city of Rotterdam. Which includes feelings and more specific experiences (places or situations). This theme reflects the that safety may differ based on location, time, and individual characteristics.	This is a direct component of the research question and forms the basis for exploring which actors influence this feeling.	Interviews.
2	Perception of Organized Crime	How students conceptualize and describe organized crime, including whether they see it as abstract or as something present in their own environment. Literature defines organized crime as internationally operating criminal networks.	This theme is crucial to understanding student awareness of organized crime, which is a precondition for perceiving its effects.	Interviews, Kleemans & Van de Bunt (1999), Paoli (2014), Vermeulen et al. (2024).
3	Impact of Organized Crime	To what extent they feel or believe that organized crime affects their own lives or those of others.	Directly addresses the first part of the research question: how organized crime affects students.	Interviews.
4	Drug Use Among Students	Students' views on drug use within their social circles: normalization, prevalence, personal	Important because students are (potential) users and thus	Interviews, Van de Dertadian (2023).

		use, openness in discussion, and boundaries.	directly linked to the demand side of drug trafficking, a key aspect of organized crime.	
5	Link Between Drug Use and Organized Crime	To what extent they recognize a connection between recreational drug use and organized crime (f.e., violence). If there is awareness.	Explores awareness of students to the effects of organized crime and their actions.	Interviews, Municipality of Rotterdam (2024, 2025a),
6	Perception of 'Ondermijning' (Subversion)	Students' understanding of 'ondermijning', defined as the use of legal structures by criminals. Includes examples they suspect or observe.	'Ondermijning' is a direct result and characteristic of organized crime and reflects its penetration into society.	Interviews, Schram et al. (2018), Tops et al. (2018).
7	Potential Involvement of Students in Subversion/Organized Crime	Students' assessment of the risk that they or peers could become (unwittingly) involved in organized crime, often due to financial pressure or lack of awareness.	Explores a concrete and potentially serious way in which students may be affected by organized crime.	Interviews.
8	Awareness & Campaigns	How students perceive and respond to anti-drug campaigns, including their opinions on effectiveness and behavioral influence.	Campaigns represent institutional actors (mainly the government) that may influence student perceptions and behavior.	Interviews, Municipality of Rotterdam (2024, 2025a, 2025b), Literature Review (explicit).

9	Image and Stereotypes of Drug Users	How students view drug users (e.g., street users vs. partygoers) and how use is perceived in social settings and affects social status.	Provides insight into how social acceptance and image shape attitudes toward drug use and its broader consequences.	Interviews.
10	Factors Influencing Sense of Safety (Actors)	What actors influence their sense of safety? These might be organizations, institutions, or people in their proximity.	Identifies individual actors and their impact.	Interviews.
11	Trust in Government Approach to Organized Crime	This measures the trust in the government (federal or municipality) to tackle these issues.	Looks how actors have impact and affects if one is willing to cooperate to combat organized crime.	Interviews, Abraham et al. (2021), Tops et al. (2018), Vermeulen et al. (2024).