



The Netherlands Institute  
for Social Research

## *Summary*

# Insights into needs and support of people in a vulnerable situation

Key figures on the problems, resources, life situation and support of people in the social domain



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# **Insights into needs and support of people in a vulnerable situation**

Key figures on the problems, resources, life situation and support of people in the social domain

Mirjam de Klerk

Evelien Eggink

Inger Plaisier

Klarita Sadiraj

## **Key message**

The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) has previously called on municipal authorities to place a greater focus on support for people with complex problems. In this study, we paint a picture of people who are not only dealing with an accumulation of problems in various areas, such as problems with running a household, financial problems or social problems, but also with a lack of resources, such as income or resilience. The SCP considers this to be a vulnerable situation. Around 1 in 10 adults in the Netherlands are in such a situation. People in a vulnerable situation participate less in their spare time, feel lonely more often and have a lower quality of life than others. Although not everyone in a vulnerable situation requires (formal) support, they should be able to fall back on the safety net of the social domain where necessary.

Municipalities should therefore be alert to both the accumulation of problems and the presence or absence of resources. This requires examining the totality of a person's life and, where necessary, providing cross-domain support and customised solutions, with attention expressly being given to strengthening people's self-management skills and resilience. In addition, there is still a need to increase the accessibility of support, including the improvement of information provision.

## **Significant differences between groups**

The Coalition Agreement Looking out for each other states: 'Everyone in the Netherlands deserves a good life and should be able to participate' (VVD et al. 2021). However, this is not yet the case for everyone: there are significant differences in how people are doing (Vrooman et al. 2023). This inequality is persistent and may be increasing due to factors such as the COVID-19 crisis, its aftermath and the energy crisis (Den Ridder et al. 2020; De Klerk et al. 2021; Vrooman et al. 2023). Significant differences may lead to the social divides deepening and to social exclusion (Putters 2021; SCP 2022).

Resource shortages play a major role in inequality between groups, as explained by the recent SCP publication Contemporary inequality (Vrooman et al. 2023). These differences in resources or forms of capital lead to the emergence of different social classes. The people in the lowest two social classes, around one in six adults, have fewer resources, a lower social position, fewer life opportunities and poorer well-being, experience less cohesion and have less confidence in politicians.

## **The social domain as a safety net**

Many people, including people in a vulnerable situation, are able to manage by themselves, often with support from their own network. For some, however, this is not the case, and they require support from their municipality. The duties of municipalities in this regard are set out in the Social Support Act (Wmo) 2015, the Youth Act and the Participation Act, collectively referred to as the 'social domain'. Under a broader interpretation, the social domain could also include municipal poverty and civic integration policies. The social domain thus serves as a safety net for people who cannot manage by themselves or with support from those around them. This safety net does not appear to be working properly, in particular for people with complex problems (Van Dam et al. 2022; Nederlandse Arbeidsinspectie 2022).

In this publication, we take a detailed look at this group of people, based on two recent surveys among the adult population (see also Verbeek-Oudijk et al. 2023). We provide up-to-date data relating to the question of how people in a vulnerable situation are doing and what support (from their network or a professional) they are receiving. We also look at 'non-users': people who need assistance but are not using support. Until now, little was known about this group (Kromhout et al. 2018; Pommer et al. 2018).

## **Around 1 in 10 adults are in a vulnerable situation; they participate less**

This study shows that around 1 in 10 adults (1.3 million people) are in a vulnerable situation: they are dealing with 3 or more problems and also lack both economic resources (such as income or education) and personal resources (such as resilience or self-management skills). This includes for instance people who have trouble running a household, have limited social contacts and are struggling with financial problems: an accumulation of problems. If they have only completed primary education or prevocational secondary education and have little resilience (few resources), it is difficult for them to cope with these problems. They have fewer opportunities to obtain or organise support by themselves. We note that

especially people facing an accumulation of problems often have relatively limited resources with which to increase their ability to deal with their problems.

People in a vulnerable situation participate less, feel lonely more often and are less satisfied with their lives than people who are not in a vulnerable situation. This is related to the types of problems they have, the number of problems and their resources. People in a vulnerable situation often manage by themselves, depending on the resources available to them. People who do need support often get it from their own network, but also from professionals, or from a combination of the two. Not everyone who needs support gets it. For example, 3% of people who need help with running a household, personal care or support do not get it (non-users). Half of these people have not requested support, for example because they want to remain independent, do not think they are eligible or think it would be too expensive.

### **What do the outcomes mean for (policy in) the social domain?**

#### *Strengthen personal and economic resources*

Many people, including people in a vulnerable situation, manage by themselves, often with the support of their own network. There is therefore a great deal of inherent strength in society. The inherent strength of people depends on the availability of resources. For example, it is well known that job and income insecurity can lead to stress, making it difficult to deal with problems (Van Baar et al. 2022). As well as these economic resources, personal resources (such as resilience and self-management skills) are also important. Accordingly, in addition to focusing on increasing social and economic security, municipalities can also work on increasing resilience and self-management skills (Van Baar et al. 2022; Geppert and Muns 2023). In addition, strengthening the informal structures and accessible preventative neighbourhood facilities provides opportunities for assistance from people's own networks and can be a meaningful part of the provision of support by municipalities. However, expectations of the inherent strength of citizens and their environment should not be too high.

#### *A cross-domain approach requires commitment from municipalities, the central government and executive parties*

The correlation revealed by this study between problems and a lack of resources underscores the importance of taking a broad view of the daily lives of citizens and providing customised solutions. For example, people can face problems in their family situation and have problems with their social network while at the same time having limited resilience to deal with these problems. This requires commitment to a cross-domain approach in the broader social domain, with connections to adjacent areas such as debt assistance, education, and home-based or institutional care. However, this is a challenge for many municipalities, due in part to organisational and financial issues and compartmentalised regulations (Plaisier and Den Draak 2021; Van Dam et al. 2022). An integrated approach requires commitment not only from municipalities but also from the central government, as well as collaboration with relevant actors in the sector (e.g. Kromhout et al. 2020; Van Dam et al. 2022; De Klerk et al. 2022; Van Gool et al. 2022).

#### *Access to support could be improved*

People experience barriers to accessing support from the social domain. Not everyone who needs support knows how to find it, because information is primarily available in digital form, application forms are too complicated and the system is difficult to understand. Municipalities appear to assume their citizens are self-sufficient and digitally literate. They could improve access to support by ensuring information is simple and by bringing it to people's attention in a range of locations using a variety of methods. In addition, citizens must have confidence that they can depend on support and respectful treatment from the government (see, for example, SCP 2022). Without such confidence, people with problems will not wish or dare to seek assistance from either central or local government (see, for example, RVS 2021).

### *Future developments reinforce the need for creative solutions*

In particular, people in vulnerable situations have been hit especially hard by the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath, the energy crisis and inflation (De Klerk et al. 2021; SCP 2021; CPB 2023). These developments may also lead to an increase in the number of people in a vulnerable situation, which is expected to lead in turn to an increase in reliance on support. This will be exacerbated by demographic developments such as an ageing population and immigration. Because the number of elderly people is increasing, and because they keep living in their own homes for longer and there is a shortage of staff in the care sector, the demands placed on informal carers and the social foundation will increase (RIVM 2018; WRR 2021; TK 2022/2023). It will therefore become increasingly important to ensure informal caregivers do not give up on their care responsibilities and citizens do not become overwhelmed by requests for help (De Boer et al. 2019). All of this calls for a long-term vision and creative solutions from the government, municipalities, employers, professionals, informal carers and citizens themselves.

This is a publication of:

The Netherlands Institute for Social Research  
Postbus 16164  
2500 BD The Hague  
[www.scp.nl](http://www.scp.nl)  
[info@scp.nl](mailto:info@scp.nl)

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