



# The Following Investigation Focuses on a Particular Group of Children in Amsterdam, Specifically those who are Compelled to Remain at Home

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**Abstract:** This study examines the growing phenomenon of children and young people in Amsterdam who are effectively compelled to remain at home due to long-term school absenteeism, exclusion, or the inability of educational institutions to provide safe and appropriate placements. Drawing upon municipal statistics, educational policy reports, absenteeism data, and qualitative case studies, the investigation analyses developments within primary education (PO), secondary education (VO), and vocational secondary education (MBO) between 2020 and 2025. The findings demonstrate a significant rise in prolonged absenteeism following the COVID-19 period, with 1,183 children recorded as absent from school for more than four weeks in Amsterdam in 2025. Comparable trends are visible within MBO education, where dropout rates have exceeded 10%. The study argues that long-term absenteeism should not solely be interpreted as an individual or parental problem, but rather as an indicator of systemic strain within the educational system. Structural shortages in Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision, waiting lists, inadequate transition guidance, teacher shortages, and rising teacher sickness absence contribute to the exclusion of vulnerable pupils. Particular attention is paid to children from immigrant, refugee and expatriate backgrounds, whose experiences suggest that discrimination, institutional bias, and processes of social exclusion may further intensify educational disengagement. The article integrates statistical analysis with illustrative case studies involving Moroccan, Iraqi, Brazilian, American-Syrian, Eritrean-Italian and Iranian children in Amsterdam. These cases reveal recurring patterns of bullying, unsafe school climates, ethnic and religious stereotyping, misrecognition of disability, and institutional responses that shift responsibility onto families rather than schools. The study further situates these contemporary developments within broader historical and sociological discussions concerning colonialism, belonging, exclusion, and Dutch integration discourse. The article concludes that Amsterdam's education system remains academically strong in aggregate terms but insufficiently inclusive for a significant group of vulnerable learners. Long-term absenteeism is therefore conceptualised as a crisis of belonging rather than merely a problem of attendance. Sustainable solutions require integrated interventions, including earlier support mechanisms, expansion of specialised educational provision, anti-discrimination safeguards, improved educational transitions, and stronger collaboration between schools, families, municipalities, and support organisations.

**Keywords:** Long-term absenteeism, school exclusion, Amsterdam education, belonging, discrimination, institutional racism, immigrants, refugees, expatriates, Special Educational Needs (SEN), vocational education (MBO), dropout, bullying, educational inequality, inclusion.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 2024/25 academic year, the number of pupils in Amsterdam attending primary education (PO, including special primary education) exceeded 60,500. Concurrently, the number of pupils enrolled in secondary education (VO) approached 47,000. This figure denotes an increase of over 107,500 pupils enrolled in primary and secondary education in Amsterdam<sup>1</sup>.

The following data sets provide information regarding the number of pupils in Amsterdam for the 2024/25 academic year:

- **Primary Education (PO):** The number of pupils exceeds 60,500. The forecast indicated that this number would stabilize around 2020; however, data from AlleC chiffres.nl demonstrates a comparable total for the 2025-2026 period.
- **Secondary Education (VO):** The total number of pupils is almost 47,000. This figure indicates an increase when compared to the results obtained in previous years.
- **Newcomers:** As of May 2023, the number of pupils in central newcomer facilities stood at 1,032.

The figures have been derived from the City of Amsterdam's Segregation Monitor 2024/'25<sup>2</sup>, which provides insight into the composition of Amsterdam's education system.

### Developments and Trends

#### *Growth in Secondary Education*

1. It is anticipated that the number of pupils in **primary education** will remain stable in the coming years, with projections indicating a range between 65,000 and 66,000.
2. Conversely, the **secondary school population** is expected to experience growth, reaching approximately 48,000.
3. **Secondary education** has an annual intake of approximately 8,000 pupils. On an annual basis, these pupils undertake the transition from year 8 to secondary school in Amsterdam.
4. **Staff:** Despite an increase in enrolment in secondary education, there has been a decline in the number of teachers in Amsterdam's primary education sector (from 5,445 in 2016 to 5,210 in 2023).

#### *Vocational Students in Amsterdam*

Recent forecasts and educational data have been utilized to estimate the total number of vocational students in Amsterdam for the 2025/2026 academic year and the subsequent period. The estimated number of students falls within the range of approximately 34,000 to 40,000.

<sup>1</sup> <https://allecijfers.nl/basisscholen/woonplaats-amsterdam/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://onderzoek.amsterdam.nl/publicatie/segregatiemonitor-primair-en-voortgezet-onderwijs-2024-25>

ROC van Amsterdam: The largest institution (ROCvA) anticipates approximately 33,950 students for the 2025/2026 academic year.

The total MBO population in Amsterdam is as follows: The total number of MBO institutions, including such notable examples as the Hout en Meubileringscollege (HMC) and the Media college Amsterdam (Ma), is approximately 40,000.

**Trend:** Despite the nationwide decline in MBO enrolment, the number of MBO students in the Greater Amsterdam region appears to be stabilising or falling slightly.

### **CHILDREN AND STUDENTS NOT ATTENDING SCHOOL**

The number of pupils in Amsterdam who are not attending primary and secondary education has risen in recent years, with 1,183 children recorded in 2025 as having been absent from school for more than four weeks. Although comprehensive historical data for the year 2000 are unavailable, recent reports indicate that, following a period of relative stability, figures from 2022 onward reveal a clear upward trend.

A comparable pattern is observable among students enrolled in vocational education (MBO). Many of these individuals remain at home without having obtained a basic qualification, suggesting non-compliance with the educational requirements established under Dutch law.

This article sets out to examine the key facts, underlying causes, and possible solutions to this issue. Its primary focus lies on primary and secondary school pupils who are effectively confined to their homes, as well as on MBO students facing similar circumstances.

#### **A Decline in School Attendance among Primary and Secondary Education Children in Amsterdam**

In the city of Amsterdam, pupils are designated as not attending school if they are absent without authorisation for a period of four weeks or more, or if they have not enrolled at an educational institution.

**2025:** The number of children not attending school in the city of Amsterdam is 1,183.

In the year **2024**, the number of pupils not attending school was recorded as 1,063.

In the year **2022**, the number of pupils not attending school was recorded as 1,046.

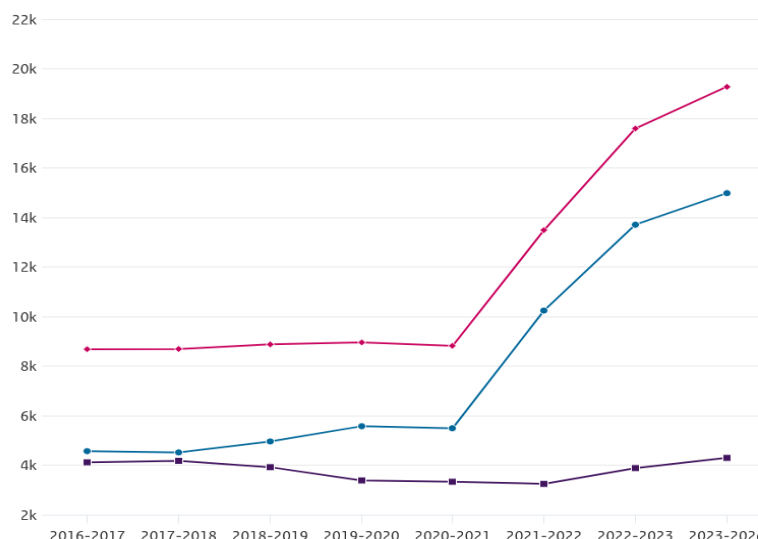
**Historical trend:** The levels of both national and local absenteeism remained relatively stable between 2016 and 2021. However, a substantial increase has been observed since the 2021-2022 academic year (Covid-19 years).

#### **Key Trends and Definitions Long-term Absenteeism among Primary and Secondary Education Children in Amsterdam**

The figures relating to absenteeism are influenced by various categories and legislation.

**Long-term absenteeism:** This pertains to instances of pupil absence that extend beyond a period of four consecutive weeks, whether the absence is authorised (for instance, in the event of illness) or unauthorised.

The present study of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, (2025) investigates the prevalence of absenteeism in children over the course of eight academic years in the Netherlands. Absenteeism is defined as the failure of a student to attend school regularly, and is further categorised into two distinct forms: **absolute absenteeism**, which refers to the complete absence of a student from school, and long-term **relative absenteeism**, which refers to the ongoing absence of a student from school for a significant period of time (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2025<sup>3</sup>).



**Figure 1: Children Not Attending School.** The total number of young people of compulsory school and training age with recorded absences, and the proportion of young people whose absences are addressed through re-engagement or resolved in some other way. **Red** = Total absenteeism; **Blue** = Absolute Absence; **Purple** = Long-term relative absenteeism.

The provision of **Special Educational Needs (SEN)** has been in effect since 2014 (Smith, 2020). Subsequent to the enactment of the pertinent legislation, educational institutions are legally obligated to identify suitable placements for pupils with additional support requirements. The dearth of such institutions and the existence of waiting lists for special educational provisions are frequently cited as the underlying causes of the increase in the number of pupils remaining at home (Smith, 2023).

**The relative versus absolute nature of absenteeism:** Relative absenteeism (truancy) has been found to be much more prevalent (with over 70,000 cases reported nationwide), whilst absolute absenteeism (not being enrolled) concerns a smaller but more serious group.

**Gifted children:** The following groups are to be considered in particular: It is estimated that 20% to 40% of children not attending school are gifted, thus constituting a notable subgroup.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ocwincijfers.nl/indicatoren-funderend-onderwijs/thuiszittende-kinderen>

## A Decline in School Attendance among Vocational Secondary Education (MBO) Students in Amsterdam

In Amsterdam, the proportion of **MBO students** who withdraw from their studies early has increased to approximately 10% in 2023 (Wagemakers, 2024; Jacobse, 2020). The issue of young people leaving education without a basic qualification (HAVO, VWO or MBO level 2) is a salient one, as it is associated with a higher risk of unemployment, social exclusion and a disadvantage in the labour market.

### *Vocational Education (MBO) & Research and Statistics (O&S) Amsterdam*

Recent reports (2024-2025) from Research and Statistics (O&S) Amsterdam, in conjunction with existing data, indicate that the rate of early school leaving (i.e. dropout rates) in Amsterdam's vocational education (MBO) is a cause for concern and has increased in recent years<sup>4 5</sup>(Koopman et al. 2016).

A rising trend of student attrition has been observed in Amsterdam's MBO institutions. Following a decline in previous years, there has been a resurgence in the number of students dropping out of education in Amsterdam. During the 2022-2023 academic year, the rate of attrition among MBO students in Amsterdam exceeded 10%.

**Numbers:** Of the 12,000-plus students who initiated an MBO programme in 2022-23, 1,266 did not successfully complete it.

The 'Pak mijn Hand' Foundation is all about helping vulnerable groups in education. It is imperative to recognise that young people facing vulnerabilities, including those transitioning from special secondary education, are predisposed to an elevated risk of disengagement. However, at levels 1 and 2, their performance in Amsterdam has recently exhibited greater stability than was previously observed.

### *Causes of Dropout*

A number of studies conducted in Amsterdam, in addition to national analyses which also apply to Amsterdam, have identified the following causes:

1. It is evident that the students have **selected an inappropriate course of study**. It has been demonstrated that there is a discrepancy between the programme's alignment with the expectations and interests of the students and the programme's actual alignment with these expectations and interests.
2. The following factors have also been identified as contributing to the issue: **personal and socioeconomic problems**. The factors under consideration include debt, housing problems, and insufficient mental resilience.
3. **Mismatch in the transition:** A number of issues have been identified during the transition from secondary education (or special needs education) to vocational education (MBO).

<sup>4</sup> <https://mbo-today.nl/amsterdam-krijgt-schooluitval-niet-onder-controle/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://ocoamsterdam.nl/vragen/wat-zijn-voortijdig-schoolverlaters-vsv>

4. **Tight labour market:** A considerable proportion of young people elect to enter the workforce directly after completing their studies, a phenomenon frequently termed "dropout to work without a diploma". This phenomenon stands in contrast to the conventional approach of completing one's educational programme prior to entering the labour market.
5. The **absence of suitable guidance** is a salient issue. It is evident that there was an absence of comprehensive guidance during the initial months of the programme, which proved to be a significant shortcoming.

### *The Policy and Approach in Amsterdam*

The MBO Agenda 2023-2027 sets out the commitment of the City of Amsterdam and MBO institutions (e.g. ROCvA, HMC, Mediacollege) to an active approach aimed at reducing dropout rates, with a particular emphasis on levels 1 and 2.

- **Prevention:** The primary focus should be on enhancing the alignment between the two parties, providing effective guidance during transitions, and implementing a Plus Program to provide supplementary support.
- **Monitoring:** O&S Amsterdam places particular emphasis on the monitoring of educational trajectories with a view to understanding and reducing rates of student attrition.

The following aspects and consequences are of key significance:

- **Definition:** In order to be considered for admission, candidates are expected to hold a basic qualification in the form of a diploma at a minimum of MBO-2 or HAVO level.
- **Risks:** Individuals who have previously experienced a cessation of education or employment may encounter diminished prospects of securing long-term employment.
- **The Amsterdam region:** The Amsterdam region is experiencing a high rate of school dropout, and the municipality is collaborating with educational institutions to address this issue.

The **Transition Point**<sup>6</sup> constitutes a municipal initiative on the part of the Municipality of Amsterdam, the purpose of which is to provide support to young people between the ages of 18 and 23 who have not yet obtained a basic qualification. These young individuals are referred to the Transition Point by their respective educational institutions.

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<sup>6</sup> **Key Pillars of Amsterdam's Transition** (link: <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=evaluation+of+the+Amsterdam+Transition+point>)

- **Circular Economy:** Amsterdam aims to halve the use of new raw materials by 2030 and become a fully circular city by 2050. The framework leans on the **Doughnut Economy** model to ensure social thresholds are met without exceeding ecological limits.
- **Energy Transition:** The city is progressively phasing out natural gas neighborhood-by-neighborhood, installing rooftop solar panels, and integrating climate adaptation into public spaces to deal with rising sea levels in the region.
- **Asset & Space Management:** The city evaluates spatial and infrastructure projects (like the Amstel Stad transformation) by grouping replacement and maintenance cycles together, treating the physical growth of the city as an integrated transition point.

While some individuals who immediately exit the education system secure employment, their long-term position in the labour market is often more precarious due to the absence of a fundamental qualification (Smith, 2019).

### **SICKNESS LEAVE TEACHERS: PRIMARY, SECONDARY EDUCATION AND MBO**

Within the Amsterdam education sector (primary and secondary), the prevalence of sick leave is notably high and has been increasing since 2020, both in terms of frequency and duration. By 2024, the sick leave rate in secondary education had increased to 6.0%. In 2024, the mean number of consecutive days on which teachers and support staff in Amsterdam were absent due to illness was 15.2, indicating that long-term absenteeism is a significant problem.

The figures below show how many school days were missed due to illness in primary and secondary schools in Amsterdam from 2020 to 2025:

1. **2020 (the year of the covid pandemic):** A radical alteration in working conditions was observed, resulting in an escalation in both workload and absenteeism.
2. **During the 2021-2022 academic year,** there was an increase in the number of sick days among educational support staff in secondary education. The average number of sick days among this group increased from 18 in 2019 to 24 in 2020, with a further increase in 2021. In 2022, the total absence rate in secondary education attained a "post-COVID peak" of 6.4%.
3. **2023-2024:** Statistical analysis indicates that the rate of sick leave within the field of primary education (PO) was high in 2024, with an average figure of 7.2%. In secondary education (VO), the average duration of absenteeism increased to 14 days in 2024.

The extant data on sick leave in Amsterdam's vocational education (MBO) and general education sectors indicate a relatively high and rising trend:

The utilisation of **sick leave** within the context of the education sector in Amsterdam is a subject that merits closer examination. A marked discrepancy is evident in the rate of sick leave in Amsterdam, which stands at 9.7 percent, significantly higher than the national average of 6.7 percent.

Across all MBO institutions (nationwide): absenteeism among MBO teaching and support staff reached 6.5 percent in 2024, a figure significantly higher than the national average across all sectors (5.2 percent).

**Long-term absenteeism:** The 2025 Occupational Health and Safety Report indicates an increase in work-related absenteeism in the Netherlands, with more than half of employees (51%) taking sick leave in 2023.

It is imperative to acknowledge that the 9.7% figure cited for Amsterdam pertains to the aggregate of absenteeism in the city's education sector, as opposed to absenteeism specifically in MBO institutions.

**Amsterdam Region 2024-2025:** The analysis indicates that in the Amsterdam region, physical complaints constitute the predominant cause of long-term absenteeism, accounting for 82.8% of cases. Teachers in Amsterdam were found to be absent due to illness for an

average of 15.2 days, which is slightly less than in other major cities. However, the incidence of total absenteeism due to illness (including municipal employees) in Amsterdam, at 9.7%, is significantly higher than the national average of 6.7%.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

key trends and children not attending school (including long-term absenteeism) among primary, secondary education and vocational secondary education children and students in Amsterdam.

The rising number of children and young people not attending school in Amsterdam—reaching 1,183 cases of prolonged absence in 2025—signals a structural rather than incidental challenge within the educational ecosystem. The post-2021 increase marks a clear break from earlier stability, suggesting that the combined effects of systemic strain (including the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic), institutional bottlenecks, and shifting socio-economic conditions have reshaped patterns of school participation.

Across primary and secondary education, absenteeism is not a uniform phenomenon but reflects layered vulnerabilities. The distinction between absolute and long-term relative absenteeism reveals that disengagement often occurs within the system rather than outside it. This points to a paradox: formal enrolment does not guarantee meaningful participation. Structural shortages in appropriate placements—particularly within Special Educational Needs provision—combined with waiting lists and limited tailored support, contribute to the effective exclusion of certain groups, including a notable proportion of gifted pupils. In this sense, absenteeism can be understood not merely as individual withdrawal, but as a symptom of systemic misalignment between educational provision and diverse learner needs.

In vocational education (MBO), similar dynamics emerge in a different guise. Dropout rates exceeding 10% reflect discontinuities in educational trajectories, particularly during transitional phases. Mismatches in programme choice, insufficient guidance, and socio-economic pressures intersect with a tight labour market that incentivises early entry into work without qualifications. While such choices may yield short-term gains, they tend to produce long-term precarity, reinforcing cycles of inequality and limiting upward mobility.

Compounding these issues is the rising level of teacher absenteeism in Amsterdam, which exceeds national averages. High workload, long-term illness, and post-pandemic pressures undermine the stability and continuity of teaching environments. This, in turn, affects student engagement and the capacity of schools to provide consistent support—especially for those already at risk of disengagement.

Taken together, these trends point to a systemic challenge characterised by fragmentation across educational stages, insufficient alignment between policy and practice, and cumulative pressures on both students and educators. Effective responses therefore require an integrated approach: strengthening early identification and intervention mechanisms; expanding capacity and accessibility in specialised educational provision; improving guidance during key transitions (particularly into MBO); and addressing workforce sustainability within education.

Ultimately, the issue of non-attendance should be reframed not solely as a problem of compliance, but as an indicator of belonging within the educational system (Steinmetz et al., 2026). Where students experience disconnection—whether due to unmet needs, institutional gaps, or broader socio-economic pressures—absence becomes a rational, if problematic, outcome. Sustainable solutions will thus depend on reconfiguring education systems to ensure that all learners are not only present, but meaningfully included.

### **An Overview of the System of Amsterdam Primary, Secondary and Vocational Education**

Amsterdam's system of primary and secondary education reflects the broader strengths of the Dutch model: it is academically robust, internationally competitive, and institutionally well-structured, yet marked by early selection and persistent inequalities. In primary education, which spans eight years and becomes compulsory from age five, pupil outcomes are determined through a combination of continuous assessment and a final national aptitude test at the end of Grade 8. While instruments such as the Cito test provide a standardised benchmark, the decisive element remains the teacher's recommendation, which ultimately determines placement in secondary education (OECD, 2016; Inspectorate of Education, 2023). Although overall standards remain high, recent inspections point to a gradual decline in reading proficiency, echoing broader international concerns about literacy (Inspectorate of Education, 2023; OECD, 2019).

At the transition to secondary education, typically at age twelve, pupils are allocated to differentiated tracks—pre-vocational (VMBO), general (HAVO), or pre-university (VWO). This early tracking system is a defining feature of Dutch education, enabling tailored instruction but also reinforcing structural stratification (OECD, 2016). In aggregate terms, outcomes remain strong: the Netherlands continues to perform above the OECD average in international assessments such as PISA, and a substantial proportion of the population attains upper-secondary or post-secondary qualifications (OECD, 2023; CBS, 2024).

Within Amsterdam, however, these strengths are accompanied by pronounced challenges. Educational inequality—closely linked to socioeconomic background and migration status—affects both achievement levels and the transition from primary to secondary education (SCP, 2022; Inspectorate of Education, 2023). Despite targeted policy interventions, disparities in school advice and track placement persist. Encouragingly, recent municipal and national initiatives aimed at improving language and mathematics outcomes have yielded measurable progress, with a majority of schools reporting gains in 2024 (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2024).

In sum, Amsterdam's educational outcomes illustrate a system that is both high-performing and highly differentiated: one that delivers strong aggregate results, yet continues to grapple with issues of equity, early selection, and uneven opportunity structures.

The Amsterdam education system is currently experiencing a decline in enrolment, particularly among children of immigrants, refugees, and expatriates. This decline is being exacerbated by the absence of teachers within these demographic groups. In the case of children and students, this phenomenon is referred to as "staying at home" and "long-term absenteeism."

In the field of education, this phenomenon is also recognised as frequent and/or long-term absenteeism among teaching staff. The City of Amsterdam has been found to be erroneously reporting positively on primary, secondary and vocational education in its city. In the longer term, this decline in enrolment will have consequences for the Amsterdam labour market (OECD, 2026).

### HYPOTHESES AND THEORY

The objective of this study is to examine the factors that result in pupils and students in Amsterdam being compelled to remain at home and to long-term absenteeism. In their 2025 anthology, Maurice Crul, Carl H.D. Steinmetz and Frans Lelie sought to address this question by examining the issues of exclusion/ disadvantage and discrimination. It could be argued that the education system in 'white' Amsterdam excludes the parents and children of immigrants, refugees and expatriates.

In the context of parental relationships, pedagogical interactions, and the rigid administration of educational institutions, it has been observed that children are frequently the subject of remarks concerning their ethnic or cultural background. It is imperative to acknowledge that these remarks may encompass references to the subjects' nationality or religious affiliation. For instance, comments such as 'He is African, so he doesn't speak Dutch' or 'She is a Muslim woman who is oppressed by her male relatives' have been reported. Furthermore, concerns have been raised about the pigmentation of children's skin, with comments such as 'I don't like the colour of their skin' being cited.

The Dutch history revealed that individuals of African descent were exhibited in cages in Dutch cities. At the time, this was regarded as an attraction.

*“Well into the twentieth century, Africans, as well as individuals from other Dutch colonies such as Indonesia and Suriname, were exhibited in the Netherlands in so-called “human zoos” or ethnological exhibitions (Blanchard et al., 2011; Qureshi, 2011). These displays took place in zoological gardens and at specialised exhibitions, where individuals were placed within reconstructed villages and presented to the public as spectacles (Blanchard et al., 2011).*

*The following provides a concise overview of some of the most significant events and locations in the Netherlands. The Neniito exhibition (1928, Rotterdam), held in the context of a major industrial fair, featured a reconstructed Senegalese village in which inhabitants were observed by visitors (Van der Woud, 2010). Similarly, ethnographic displays occurred in zoological settings. For example, in 1893, a group referred to as the “Amazons of Dahomey” was exhibited at the Royal Zoological and Botanical Gardens in The Hague (Blanchard et al., 2011).*

*The International Colonial and Export Trade Exhibition constituted a pivotal moment in the relationship between the Dutch metropole Amsterdam and its colonies. Held in Amsterdam, this exhibition prominently featured individuals from the colonies as part of a broader celebration of imperial power and colonial identity (Bloembergen, 2006).*

*The purpose of these exhibitions was to provide Western audiences with a selective and often distorted representation of life in colonised regions. Such displays frequently served to reinforce colonial ideologies by portraying non-European peoples, particularly Africans, as “primitive” or “savage” (Said, 1978; Wekker, 2016).*

*From the perspective of lived experience, those exhibited were often treated as objects of curiosity, comparable to animals in a zoological setting, rather than as individuals with agency and dignity (Blanchard et al., 2011). These practices were widespread across Europe and persisted into the 1920s and 1930s (Blanchard et al., 2011; Qureshi, 2011)<sup>7</sup>.*

At the time, most people thought that these people (“creatures”) were animals. They thought that people came from far and wide to see them in these “human zoos”. It is perhaps even more shocking that some scholars advocated for the mating of these “creatures” with monkeys. This can be attributed to the supposition that the discrepancy was deemed to be of negligible significance. The Dutch people have been shaped by their history, including the centuries-long colonisation of 53 countries. This mark is both epigenetic and socio-cultural in nature.

The contemporary consequence of this phenomenon is the marginalisation of immigrants, refugees and expatriates by a significant proportion of the Dutch population, particularly by far-right extremists affiliated with the Party for Freedom (PVV), Forum for Democracy (FvD), Right Answer (JA21) and Interest for the Netherlands (BnVL), over 27% in 2026 of the Members of the House of Representatives of the Dutch Parliament (The People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) is not yet included in this analysis because only some of them hold far-right views. The political party under discussion now holds 22 seats (14,7%) in the Dutch House of Representatives, a fact that is partially indicative of its far-right views).

The Netherlands has historically adopted a reserved position on this particular exclusion. This attitude is erroneously referred to abroad as ‘Dutch tolerance’. This is an issue which already has sufficient importance. The validity of this assertion is further substantiated by the following data. The hypothesis that the Dutch population as a whole holds a negative attitude towards immigrants, refugees and expatriates is not entirely accurate. Attitudes in the Netherlands are mixed and context-dependent, and have shifted over time due to economic, political and social factors. The subsequent section will delineate the predominant dynamics that shape these perceptions:

### ***The Challenge of Housing and Public Services in the Netherlands***

The Netherlands, notably its cities such as Amsterdam, is currently experiencing a significant shortage of housing. Rising rents and extensive waiting lists for social housing have led some residents to associate newcomers (including expatriates and refugees) with increased competition for limited space. This phenomenon is frequently less about identity and more about scarcity and frustration (Smith, 2023). This has given rise to debates concerning language use, education, and social cohesion (Brown et al., 2021).

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<sup>7</sup> <https://ap.lc/jResJ>

### ***A Distinction Between Groups***

Public attitudes are frequently observed to vary depending on how newcomers are perceived.

#### ***Expats (Often Highly Skilled Workers):***

The term "expats" is used to refer to individuals who have relocated to a new country for employment purposes. These individuals are frequently highly skilled workers, and their presence is perceived to have a positive economic impact on the host country. Nevertheless, concerns have been raised regarding the impact of expatriates on the local housing market, as their relocation has the potential to contribute to rising property prices. Furthermore, there is a perception that expatriates may be less engaged with the broader community and this may result in limited intermingling with native Dutch people. This phenomenon is often referred to as an "international bubble," where the expatriates form a distinct community that is separate from the local population.

#### ***Refugees and Asylum Seekers:***

Discussions pertaining to this subject tend to focus on issues of integration, the financial implications of welfare costs, and the capacity to accommodate such a significant influx of individuals.

#### ***Labour Migrants (e.g., from EU countries):***

Concerns may centre on working conditions, housing, overcrowding, or wage competition. It is evident that the sentiment is not monolithic in nature; rather, it is subject to variation according to category, visibility, and economic role.

### ***Political Climate***

The issue of immigration has been a matter of central importance in Dutch politics for a considerable number of years (Jones, 2022). Politicians such as Geert Wilders and parties such as the Party for Freedom have brought strong anti-immigration views into the mainstream, influencing public discourse - even among people who do not fully agree (Smith et al., 2020).

### ***Economic Concerns***

The following concerns have been expressed by a number of individuals: The issue of pressure on wages in certain sectors has been identified, as well as strain on welfare systems and unequal access to opportunities (Brown et al., 2021). However, it should be noted that many economists have also pointed out as demonstrated by Smith et al. (2020), migrants have been shown to be capable of filling labour shortages and making a contribution to the economy, particularly within the fields of healthcare, technology and logistics.

### ***A Comparison of Urban and Rural Differences***

In major cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht, a clear distinction can be observed between different groups. Public attitudes are frequently observed to vary depending on how newcomers are perceived. The term "expats" is employed to denote individuals who have been residing in a given country for a specified duration, frequently designated as "highly skilled workers".

While these individuals are occasionally regarded as economically advantageous to the nation, a correlation has been identified between this phenomenon and the escalation in housing costs, as well as the emergence of "international bubbles" characterised by constrained integration.

### ***Refugees and Asylum Seekers***

Discussions pertaining to this subject tend to focus on issues of integration, the financial implications of welfare costs, and the capacity to accommodate such a significant influx of individuals. Labour migrants (etc. concerns may centre on working conditions, housing overcrowding, or wage competition (Smith, 2023). It is evident that a uniform sentiment is not observed; rather, the sentiment varies according to category, visibility and economic role (Jones, 2021).

### ***Cultural and Integration Debates***

Dutch society is distinguished by a pronounced emphasis on direct communication, secularism, and gender equality (Smith, 2023).

### ***The Present Political Climate***

Immigration with a focus on assimilation has been a central issue in Dutch politics for decades. The anti-immigration sentiments expressed by politicians such as Geert Wilders and parties such as the Party for Freedom have become mainstream, exerting a significant influence on public discourse, even among those who do not fully subscribe to these views.

### ***Economic Concerns***

Some individuals regarding raised the following concerns:

1. The issue of wage pressure in specific sectors has been identified as a salient concern. Furthermore, an increase in demand for welfare systems has been observed, and the inequitable distribution of opportunities has been identified as a contributing factor.
2. Concurrently, a significant number of economists have emphasised that migrants also address labour shortages and contribute to the economy, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, technology, and logistics.

### ***Parallels Between Urban and Rural Areas***

In major cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht, multiculturalism is the prevailing norm and is more readily accepted. In smaller communities, such rapid demographic shifts can be perceived as more disruptive, resulting in more pronounced reactions.

### ***It is Imperative to Acknowledge the Significance of this Counterpoint***

The Netherlands is still:

1. The region is distinguished by a highly internationalised economy, with a notable presence of immigrant communities. Moreover, it functions as a notable location for students, workers and refugees.
2. Many Dutch people are welcoming, pragmatic, and used to diversity, even if concerns exist alongside that.

### **Providing a Challenging Interpretation of the Prevailing Theories on Anti-Immigrant, Refugee and Expatriate Issues: A Fusion Theory**

The phenomenon under scrutiny (remaining at home and long-term absenteeism) is not merely a matter of personal disapproval; rather, it is a multifaceted constellation, encompassing practical pressures relating to housing and services, cultural debates, and political framing. The responses to this initiative have been varied, with some individuals expressing criticism, while others have offered support. A significant proportion of respondents have articulated a more nuanced perspective, occupying a position that lies between the two aforementioned extremes.

This so-called tolerant stance in the Netherlands is now outdated. Professor Dr Maurice Crul and his colleagues demonstrate this through a study conducted in various European cities entitled 'Becoming a Minority (2023)'.

#### ***“Signalling inclusion, increasing belonging: People without a migration background in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods***

*People without a migration background tend to segregate in multicultural cities and have little contact with people of other ethnic backgrounds. To receive a better understanding of mechanisms underlying processes of segregation in such neighbourhoods, we focus on contexts in which people without a migration background are a numerical ethnic minority while another ethnic group is dominant. Using a vignette survey experiment conducted in Amsterdam (n = 364), we show that certain forms of inclusion indirectly increase the willingness to frequent places in the neighbourhood in which people without a migration background are an ethnic minority. In particular, we examine the effects of a direct (all-inclusive approach) and an indirect (numerical representation) form of inclusion on the feeling of belonging. The results show that the feeling of belonging is increased by a direct sign of inclusion which in turn increases the willingness to frequent the contexts (Lisa-Marie Kraus & Maurice Crul (2022)).”*

At this juncture in the argument, it is a legitimate question to pose whether there remains any value in examining the extant theories and ideas (Social Positioning Theory: Steinmetz et al. 2026). The prevailing theories in the Western world, particularly in the Northern Hemisphere, continue to operate under the assumption that the majority of the population is of Caucasian descent, with individuals of colour constituting a minority demographic. This approach fosters the concept of integration, albeit in a discreet manner. However, it is first necessary to define the term 'integration'.

*"Integration<sup>89</sup> is when one group of people becomes a bigger group, often a society, and the new people mix with everyone else but still keep their own identity. It is a two-way process of newcomers and the existing population adapting to each other. The most important ideas are mixing, joining together and getting involved.*

*Here are the most important points and explanations:*

1. **Social context:** *This is when people who are not part of the main group mix with the main group.*
2. **Reciprocity:** *It's not just about the migrants adapting, but also about the host society being open to them.*
3. **This is not the same as assimilation.** *When people integrate, they keep their own culture, but when they assimilate, their original culture disappears (sic: often not true).*

*Here are some examples of how to use it (in what situations):*

**Society:** *Integration of refugees through learning the language, finding work and following the rules.*

**Information/System:** *We are putting together different sets of data and putting them all into one system, all in one place.*

**Mathematics:** *To calculate an area, you can take the limit of sums. This is called "integral calculus".*

*Here are some other ways to say 'integration': Connection, combination, link, merging, amalgamation, unification, joining."*

Rather than examining a single component of the population within a specific locale, it would be more advantageous to consider the **collective development** of the population as a whole. This approach is designed to prevent the escalation of intergroup hostility and division within the population. This process can be termed 'fusion', whereby the constituent elements coalesce to create a larger entity, the nature of which remains to be elucidated.

The good thing about these fusion processes is that they stop us thinking about old concepts/ narratives in a negative way, like indigenous people, immigrants, refugees or expats.

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<sup>8</sup>

<https://www.encyclo.nl/begrip/integratie#:~:text=Integratie%20is%20de%20opname%20in,bevolkingsgroepen%20van%20beide%20kanten%20komt.>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=definitie+integratie>

But it is very important to understand that these new fusion regions are connected to other parts of the world. In the traditional idea of integration and assimilation, the terms 'motherland' and 'fatherland' were used. It is very important to understand exactly how this phenomenon affects the way components are connected to those in different places. It is possible that these are two separate fusion processes.

**Fusion-process 1:** one part becomes part of a larger whole. This process is reciprocal in nature. This dynamic encompasses the reciprocal exchange of resources and influence between (the minority and majority) groups. The matter is not straightforward, as it concerns identity - the identity of the 'minority' and the population as a whole.

**Fusion-process 2:** People from all over the world with similar backgrounds come together to form one big group. This issue must be dealt with very seriously. People who move to a new country from another country usually keep their original national and cultural identity. When they go back to visit their homeland as tourists, they feel like they don't fit in because they see how things have changed over time. If they are seen as 'strangers' in both places, that would be really bad. This fusion-process will therefore also have to make room for the changes, for better or worse (ideological, political, social and economic), in their original homeland.

At this juncture in the argument, a challenging question is raised: namely, how can these two merger fusion-processes coexist? There is a risk, after all, that they might work against one another. One of these approaches is characterised by a shift towards a larger socio-economic-geographical entity, while the other is focused on the convergence of 'motherland' contexts across a multitude of geographical locations. It is conceivable that both fusion processes can be regarded as two distinct dimensions: one that unites people geographically and one that connects them through ancestry. This perspective is exemplified by individuals with children from partners in other countries - a demographic often termed 'bi- or tricultural'.

### **The Following are Illustrative Cases of Children not Attending School in Amsterdam**

This chapter discusses examples of children who have been or are being excluded from education (see Steinmetz et al. 2026).

**Firstly**, we want to present an **11-year-old Moroccan boy** who was compelled to remain at home and refrain from attending school on the basis of his mother's Muslim faith merits consideration. The school has expressed its disapproval of her decision to wear a headscarf. The child was obliged to remain at home for a period exceeding twelve months and was subsequently presented with a new opportunity by virtue of the interventions of the "Pak mijn Hand Foundation". In a different district of Amsterdam, "Pak mijn Hand" identified a dedicated CEO willing to provide assistance to the child. The young man has now been admitted to pre-university education (VWO). It is evident that one of the board members has dedicated a significant amount of energy as a volunteer to this young man's social-emotional development.

## A NEW CHANCE FOR AN 11-YEAR-OLD BOY

Faith should never be a reason to keep a child from school.



**Figure 2:** Picture made with AI

**Secondly**, we would like to share the experiences of a **young Iraqi man** (now 16 years old). The student's enrolment at a primary school was refused on the basis of religious discrimination, due to the student's mother being a practising Muslim.

Subsequent to the completion of his primary education, he enrolled in a grammar school (gymnasium in Dutch Education). In that setting, a substantial proportion of his time was spent in the toilet, as he experienced a sense of insecurity within the school environment. Following a period of home education, he transitioned to a special needs educational facility at the secondary level. The subject's circumstances were satisfactory until recently, when he began to spend a considerable amount of time at home (a potential consequence of an as yet unidentified illness).

**Thirdly**, the experiences of a **Brazilian girl of almost 18** have added further depth to the experiences of the Pak Haar Hand Foundation. This young lady was a student at a secondary school in Amsterdam, where her physical attractiveness was widely noted. The subject has been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). She asserts that she does not find people to her liking, and that she interprets others' non-verbal cues. The total duration of her convalescence was one year, which she underwent in the comfort of her family home. This decision was informed, at least in part, by the counsel of the child psychiatrist. The student is currently enrolled in a special education school programme, preparatory scientific education (VWO 5). Her approach to learning is worthy of note.

The process is comprised of the following stages. Initially, the learner must engage with a designated module. Secondly, it is imperative that they observe its practical applications. Subsequently, the learner must undertake the application process autonomously. Upon completion of all modules, a final test is mandatory. A similar model is offered by Khan Academy online (<https://www.khanacademy.org/?country=266>).

**Fourth**, a young American-Syrian child with autism spectrum disorder who has autism and a neuromuscular disorder according to the specialists of the Amsterdam University Medical Centre. At primary education school, a teacher has the following view of this child: 'There's nothing wrong with him. I've been working with children for 20 years.'

We found that this kid was structurally bullied at school by other pupils. For example, he was forced to take his trousers off in front of other children. He didn't realise he could say no. The school thought he should learn to stand up to bullies. This is a view held in many Dutch schools.

His mother loses her job because she is the only one looking after him. This child went back home several times because he wasn't getting any support at primary school. His teacher refused to help him. The school said that the mother might have 'Munchausen syndrome by proxy'. At last, her parents from America were able to pay for this child to go to a private school, but they could only pay for it for a limited time.

The director of Family Support (ambulant mental health) finally organised a restorative conference with everyone involved, including the CEO and the director of this particular Amsterdam primary education school. Special primary education suggested a solution.

**Fifth**, I interviewed a mum and her little son about the serious problems in primary education in Amsterdam-West. The boy's mum is from Eritrea and his dad is from Italy. The boy is said to be a lively, creative and talented child who loves to dance. He goes to classes at Lucia Marthas, where he has been chosen for the preparatory course. When he's not at school, he's happy, safe and people recognise him.

The mother says there were problems at different primary schools. Her son is said to have repeated year 1 two times, even though his mother says he was ready for year 3. At school, his behaviour was becoming the focus of more attention. At home, his mother saw him as a lively, normal and cheerful child. Things got worse when problems were written in his pupil file, partly after a letter from another parent who said the boy was dangerous. The mother thought this was unfair and discriminatory.

The boy says that at school, teachers pinched him, hit him and shouted at him. He also mentions some teachers who were kind. He says that these teachers didn't make up stories, stand in for others or shout. During the interview, the boy looks sad when they start talking about school. His mother says that the way he is anxious, wetting the bed and worrying about school is a sign that he is very stressed.

The mother thinks that institutional racism is a factor. She says that children of colour are more likely to be seen as problematic at school and are pushed towards exclusion because of their bad behaviour. She has asked for help from the education authorities, the education inspectorate, OCO (Amsterdam Educational Community Organization), but has not received much help that has worked. The little boy has been at home since the start of the 2023 school year. His mum has had to borrow money to pay for extra support for him outside of school.

The most important part of the interview is that the young boy needs a safe school where he can do well and not be excluded. At the same time, we need to admit what happened, investigate whether there was any discrimination, and make sure that parents, children and schools can trust each other again.



**Figure 3:** Picture made with AI

Six, a 13-year-old Iranian boy finds school (secondary school) very difficult. He is being bullied at school. Bullying can happen anywhere, like at school or on the street. On the street, his bike is kicked to pieces. He gets angry when he is bullied and then blamed for it. The head of year at this school knows there is a problem with bullying, but she can't do anything about it.

This means that this young man is stuck at home. He gets bored there. He spends a lot of time on his phone and playing video games. His parents do not approve of this.



**Figure 4:** Picture made with AI

At the same time, the special education service has told him that he is eligible. Now his parents have to find a new school for him. This is a world that has been completely turned upside down. The school is to blame for the problem, so the parents have to find a new school for the young man, who has to stay at home.

### **SUMMARY**

This investigation examines children and young people in Amsterdam who are effectively forced to remain at home because the education system does not provide them with a safe, suitable or timely school placement. Although Amsterdam has more than 107,500 pupils in primary and secondary education, the number of children absent from school for more than four weeks has risen to 1,183 in 2025. Similar concerns exist in vocational education, where dropout rates among MBO students have exceeded 10%.

The study argues that school absence is not simply a matter of individual behaviour or parental non-compliance. Rather, it reflects structural problems: long waiting lists, insufficient special educational provision, weak transitions between school types, inadequate guidance, and the cumulative effects of teacher shortages and high staff sickness absence. Formal enrolment does not always mean meaningful participation; many children are registered somewhere but are not truly included.

A central hypothesis is that exclusion is intensified for children of immigrants, refugees and expatriates. The text links contemporary educational exclusion to longer histories of colonialism, racism and Dutch “tolerance” as an often misleading self-image. It proposes that schools may sometimes interpret children through ethnic, religious or cultural stereotypes rather than through their actual abilities and needs.

Several case studies illustrate this pattern. They include Moroccan, Iraqi, Brazilian, American-Syrian, Eritrean-Italian and Iranian children who experienced exclusion, bullying, discrimination, unsafe school environments, misrecognition of disability or prolonged home-sitting. In some cases, parents had to organise support themselves, incur debt, or rely on foundations such as Pak mijn Hand to secure new educational opportunities.

The report concludes that Amsterdam’s education system is high-performing in general terms but insufficiently inclusive for vulnerable pupils. Long-term absenteeism should therefore be understood as a warning sign: not merely absence from school, but absence of belonging. Sustainable solutions require early intervention, stronger special education capacity, anti-discrimination safeguards, better transition support, and a shift from blaming parents or children towards shared institutional responsibility.

### **DISCUSSION**

If the gods were to see us humans, they would wonder about us. “Why can’t people just get along?” “Is it about the things that make us different or the things that make us the same?” they would ask themselves. Some gods think they made a mistake when they created humans. But it’s not that simple. People have been changing over millions of years.

Most gods would ask themselves: is there no solution for humanity, which is good at arguing, turning people into enemies, starting wars, violating women’s and children’s rights,

and so on. "Oh," say the gods, "shall we send humanity a special message? As Moses, Muhammad, Buddha, and Krishna did?"

But then the question is: what should that message contain? We humans could ask the gods. The gods say that this message is one that already exists: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

When it comes to education, this means: "Think about what this means for teachers, educators, and students. Set up a programme through which students learn to love one another, teachers learn to love their students and the educators of the students, but also educators and students learn to love teachers. There is already an International program called 'belonging.' The programme's slogan is: 'I love you and care for you.'"

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