

Personal control

The importance to society
of personal control

WRR



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This publication is an English-language summary of WRR Report 108, *Grip. Het maatschappelijk belang van persoonlijke controle*.

For substantiation of the conclusions and recommendations presented here, the reader is referred to the comprehensive analysis of policy and the scientific literature to be found in WRR Report 108.

The Council presented the report *Grip. Het maatschappelijk belang van persoonlijke controle* (isbn 978-90-832908-3-6) to the Dutch government on 30 november 2023. The report may be downloaded for free at wrr.nl.

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Why giving people more personal control is good for society

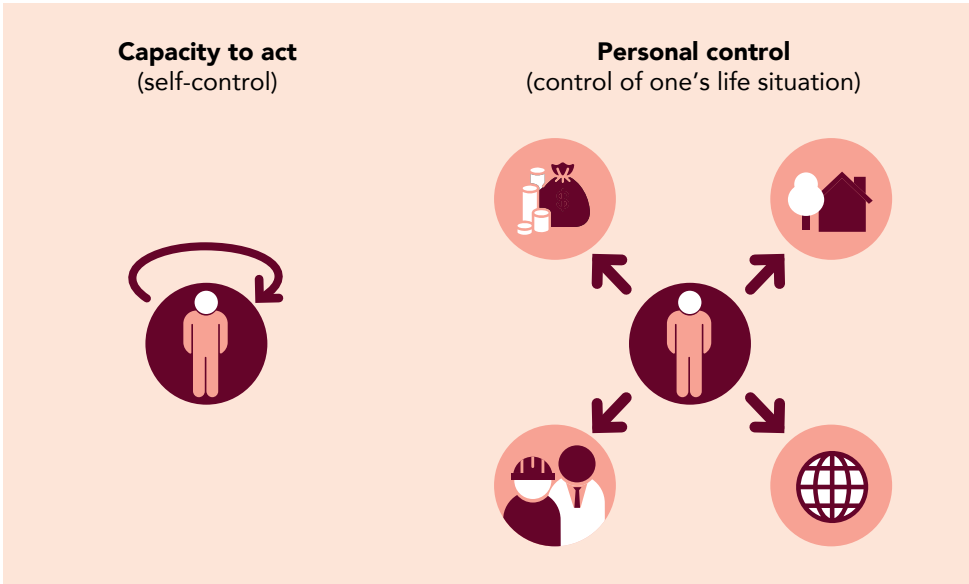
This report is about the importance of personal control. By ‘personal control’ we mean the extent to which people can achieve their life goals through their own actions. Examples of these life goals are getting a decent job, earning enough income, having a pleasant home and a satisfying social life. Studies show that if people are facing uncertainty and do not feel in control of their lives, this can affect their health and significantly reduce their levels of life satisfaction. It can also be a source of societal discontent, and it may be linked to beliefs that are not conducive to a democratic state under the rule of law. The key message of this report is that government should put more effort into strengthening people’s personal control.

The perspective of individual citizens

For this report, the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) started the analysis from the perspective of the individual, from his or her perceptions, experiences, wishes and life goals. In academic literature, this is referred to as the ‘first-person perspective’: putting yourself in the shoes of individual citizens and seeing how the world presents itself to them. The report is based on psychological research, with the aim of better understanding social phenomena, thereby opening up new directions for government policy.

By taking this behavioural science approach, this report is a follow-up to the WRR’s 2017 report entitled ‘*Weten is nog geen doen*’ (i.e. ‘Why knowing what to do is not enough’), but with one major difference (see Figure 1):

- ‘Why knowing what to do is not enough’ mainly reported on self-control: the extent to which people are capable of effectively being in control of *their own behaviour*. For this, we introduced the term ‘capacity to act’.
- This report is about what might be called ‘control of one’s life situation’: the extent to which people are able to effectively influence their *life circumstances and environment* and, by doing so, achieve their goals. For this, we use the term ‘personal control’.

Figure 1 Capacity to act and personal control

Needless to say, the two concepts are related, because anyone who wants to effectively influence their life situation and environment has to first be able to control their own behaviour. In other words, 'personal control' presupposes the 'capacity to act'. But the latter on its own is not enough. Effectively influencing one's life circumstances requires more than that, for example having enough financial resources, social networks and formal rights. These are all elements that contribute to personal control.

Personal control



What is 'personal control'?

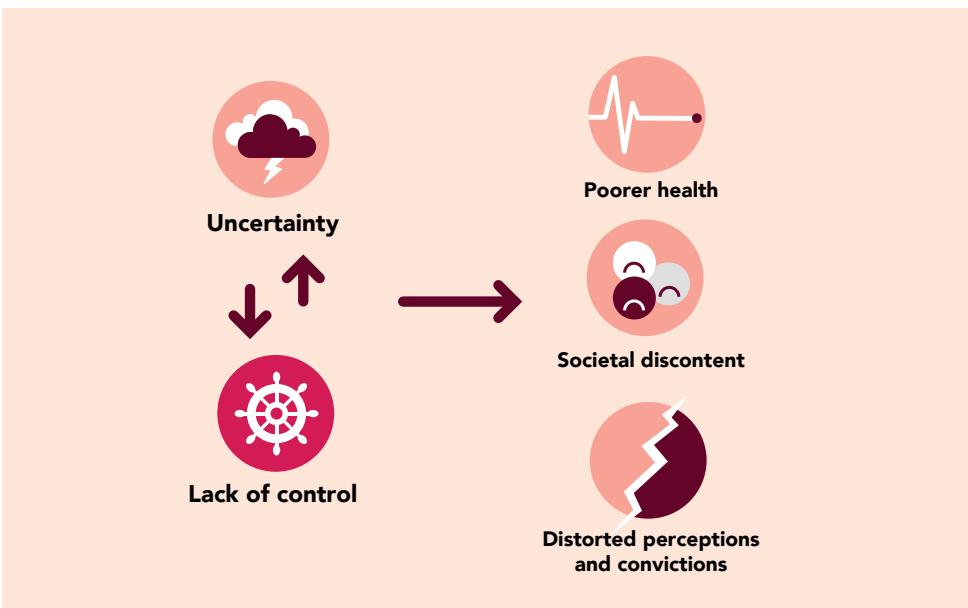
By 'personal control' we mean the extent to which people can achieve the outcomes they strive for through their own actions. In the behavioural science literature, this is also called 'perceived control' or 'mastery'. These terms refer to the capacities, resources and rights people have for coping with the uncertainties of life, while at the same time achieving their goals despite these uncertainties. Examples include access to programmes and training courses to develop personally besides your work; the resources needed to get a decent place to live; the knowledge and skills to find your way in the world of regulations; healthcare and other facilities; plus having a social network that can help you when the going gets tough; or the formal rights and actual opportunities to influence what happens in your immediate living environment.

To avoid misunderstandings: 'personal control' is very different from social control or Orwellian government control, which some may associate with the concept of 'control'. 'Personal control' is not about controlling the individual. On the contrary: it is about control being in the hands of the individual, about people's ability to successfully navigate their way through a world full of uncertainties. Personal control is closely associated with self-determination and positive freedom.

The importance to society of personal control

In recent decades, successive Dutch cabinets have emphasised individual responsibility. The idea is that citizens should expect less from the government and instead do more themselves to achieve their life goals. This report is not about whether that political choice is the right one. But it makes the point that, if the government insists on putting so much emphasis on individual responsibility, it is essential that it promotes the conditions that citizens need if they are to live up to their own individual responsibility. Trouble looms if people are affected by uncertainty while not feeling that they are in control of their lives and living circumstances. It may well lead to all kinds of unwelcome outcomes. Figure 2 presents our line of reasoning.

Figure 2 Line of reasoning



Large swathes of the public are insecure and feel they lack personal control

In this report, we demonstrate that uncertainty and a lack of control are a reality for many people, not only in terms of work and income. They are also an issue in other important areas of life, such as health, housing and the living environment. What's more, uncertainties tend to mount up: uncertainty in one area, for instance income, triggers uncertainty in another area, for instance housing. This prompts people to postpone important life choices, such as having children. The concurrence of these various aspects affects young people and low-income households in particular.

Less control means less happiness and poorer health, and a shorter life

Research carried out by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research shows that feeling in control is strongly correlated with overall life satisfaction and happiness. Moreover, major longitudinal studies show that one's sense of control is strongly associated with a variety of mental and physical health outcomes, ranging from depression to cardiovascular disease. On average, people who score low for personal control also die younger.

Less control is a source of societal discontent

A person's sense of control is also related to societal discontent, i.e. to a general feeling that 'society' is not doing well. We found that those who score low on sense of control in their own lives are also more likely to believe that society is heading in the wrong direction – even when differences in insecurity are taken into account. This is not to say that we can explain all feelings of societal discontent in this way. The phenomenon is too complex for that. What it does do, however, is point us in a direction that thus far has received little attention from researchers. There is an important message here for policymakers: feelings of social unease are sometimes disguised personal concerns. They are not only a reflection of how society is doing as a whole but can also be a reflection of how individual people feel they are doing in their own lives.

Less control is associated with distorted perceptions and convictions

A lack of feeling in control is also linked to perceptions and attitudes that can be harmful to a healthy and well-functioning democracy. For instance, several studies have shown that feeling a lack of personal control can amplify thinking in terms of 'them' versus 'us', and reinforce the yearning for 'strong leaders'. What is more, in response to a threat to their control, people may attribute more power to enemies or look for scapegoats, and lean more towards simple interpretations of the world, one filled with clear cause-and-effect relationships. No wonder, then, that some studies have found a link between a lack of personal control and belief in conspiracies.

Advocating for thinking in terms of personal control

The lesson to be learnt from this report is that when you look at policy from the perspective of personal control, you get a better understanding of certain social problems and will discover novel solutions. By examining social realities from this perspective, we can shed a new light on some of the problems we are currently facing, while at the same time revealing different approaches to policy. Here are four examples.

A new perspective on socio-economic health disparities

One of the persistent problems in our society is the inequality in health between people with a low socio-economic status and people in higher socio-economic classes (the so-called 'health gradient'). The difference in life expectancy between the most and least affluent people is seven to eight years, and the difference in healthy life expectancy is as much as 23 to 25 years. For decades now policymakers have been trying to narrow this gap with all kinds of prevention programmes, but so far to little avail. But if one views the issue from the perspective of 'personal control', one will soon discover that these health disparities can to a large degree be explained by the fact that those with a lower socio-economic status tend to have less control of their lives. This affects their mental and physical condition, which in turn shortens their lives.

This means that information provision and prevention alone will not suffice to eliminate health disparities. A key factor is addressing the more deeply embedded inequalities that underly feelings of 'being in control of life'. Improving the health of people in lower socio-economic classes calls for more socioeconomic opportunities, resources and rights for personal control.

The downsides of citizen participation

Another example involves participation and having a say. More participation is often considered to be the answer to societal discontent. The Dutch Environment and Planning Act, which came into effect in 2024, also prescribes participation, although without attaching many conditions to it. From the perspective of personal control, more participation is beneficial to those who have the time and the skills to operate effectively in this kind of procedure. To them, this probably means having more control over their living environment. But the opposite is true for people who do not have the time and skills. For them, the shift from a representative to a participatory democracy may lead to less control. They would probably benefit more from a 'traditional' representation offered by competent representatives who can counter the more vocal and organised interests.

This means that policymakers who believe they can reduce discontent through 'more participation' may well be fooling themselves, because for some citizens this may actually mean having less personal control. That is why, besides providing participatory routes, it is crucial that our representative democracy continues to function properly and to the full extent.

A source of discontent and questionable perceptions and narratives

This next example concerns a collection of phenomena that many are concerned about today: issues such as them-versus-us thinking, polarisation, scapegoating and belief in conspiracies. Taken from the perspective of personal control, it becomes clear that these phenomena are not just the result of notions and narratives circulating in the media and on the internet. They may partly be a response to a lack of control of one's own life. Indeed, research suggests that those who feel that their personal control is under threat are more likely to go along with these notions and narratives, so that they can cling to their belief in an orderly world and the possibility of being in control.

What is the policy implication of this? It is by no means the case that all the phenomena mentioned can be traced back to a lack of control of one's own life, but it may well be one of the factors. Hence, those who aim to counteract these phenomena would do well to go beyond merely 'explaining the facts' better. Key is assessing the extent to which these kinds of feelings, perceptions and stories are related to powerlessness in one's own life, and what can be done about it.

Personal control as an issue of distributive justice



New issues of distributive justice: from purchasing power to personal control

Greater control for one person may sometimes mean less control for another. For instance, one of the consequences of the non-committal interpretation of participation advocated by the Environment and Planning Act may be that it is precisely those members of the public with less time and who are not as skilled with dealing with bureaucracy who, as a consequence of this Act, will have less control over their living environment. In the housing market, too, more personal control for one person may mean less control for another. Consider, for example, the effects of the legal opportunity that wealthy parents in the Netherlands had of giving their children a one-off tax-free gift worth 100,000 euros to buy a house.

In short, gains in personal control for some may mean a loss in control for others. This means that policymakers not only have to consider how to maximise the personal control that citizens have. They also have to question whether their measures will have redistributive implications in this respect and, if so, the extent to which these implications can or should be avoided. From the perspective of personal control, 'purchasing power' is not what it is all about. Instead it is a means for something else, namely achieving life goals. While money may be an important means in this respect, it is not the be-all and end-all. All resources, capacities and rights that contribute to personal control are important. So perhaps politicians should stop focusing on 'purchasing

power' and put the spotlight on 'personal control' instead. What do policies mean for the entirety of factors affecting people's 'control on life'?

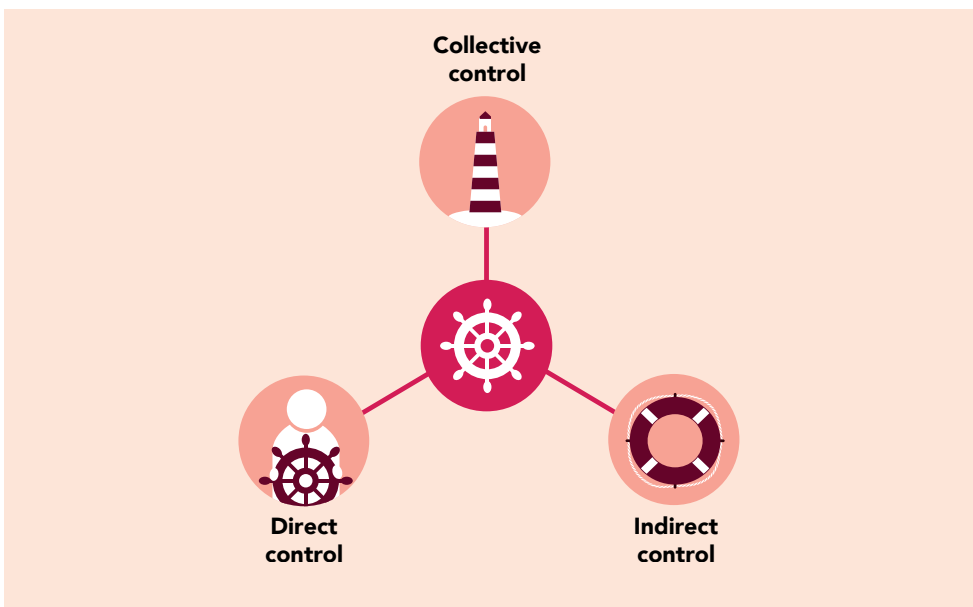
Focus on personal control

In recent decades, there have been two dominant positions in the social debate concerning insecurity. The one position was 'get used to it'. Uncertainty and insecurity are simply facts of life, which people must learn to live with. The other position was that it is the government's task to eliminate all uncertainties as much as possible. In this report, we have shown that there is a third, more productive solution, namely finding the right balance between uncertainty and personal control. Only when citizens have sufficient control of their lives can they handle a certain degree of uncertainty. Key to achieving this balance is that the government not only focuses on providing a basis for security, but also that it puts more effort into increasing citizens' personal control.

In the report, we discuss three avenues that the government can take to help increase individuals' personal control (see also Figure 3):

- direct control: directly strengthening the personal control of citizens;
- indirect control: strengthening the personal control of citizens with the assistance of stakeholders and institutions that can act on behalf of individuals;
- collective control: strengthening the personal control that society as a whole has over its future.

Figure 3 Three kinds of control



Direct control: more opportunities for individual personal control

The first route is to create more opportunities for citizens to effectively influence their own personal situations. For instance, give them more control over what kind of work they do and under what conditions, in which neighbourhood they live and in what type of housing, or the level of their income. The text box below sets out a few examples of how to go about this.

- The WRR has already advised on how improvements can be made in terms of work, for example by giving members of staff the option of how many hours they want to work. Giving workers more opportunities to vary the length of their working hours throughout their careers will help them to cope more effectively with uncertainties in their personal lives, such as having children, getting divorced or losing a partner.
- Obviously, shortages in the housing market are putting limits on what is possible from a personal control perspective, but that does not mean that there are no opportunities at all. For instance, let several people share a house by allowing them to combine their waiting times for social housing if they move in together. Or let several individual households sign one lease. Or make it easier to swap social housing between different municipalities, give priority to elderly people who want to move out of scarce rented housing, or allow the elderly to move to another dwelling for the same rent.
- It is also possible to give local residents more personal control when planning the living environment. For instance, when building and operating wind farms, it is quite possible to give local residents more opportunities to participate and invest, which in turn gives them a better handle on developments.

Precondition: a navigable public environment

Having direct control requires that people know what their rights and opportunities are, where to go if they want to exercise these rights and avail themselves of these opportunities, and that the regulations for this are easy to comprehend and feasible. They also need to be confident that those rules will not suddenly change overnight or that there is a catch to these rules. People are more likely to feel a sense of control when government and public institutions are transparent, predictable and reliable, so that the social and institutional environment is navigable.

Indirect control: personal control through associations and representing collective interests

Trade unions, cooperatives, interest groups and civic initiatives can also be a means to getting personal control. Recently, a new wave of these kinds of collective actions has become evident, not only in the field of social security but also in housing, healthcare, food, the energy transition and the environment. These initiatives offer individual members of the public an opportunity to take control of important issues in life, which they could otherwise not achieve on their own.

- So-called ‘bread funds’ are a prime example of this. People use bread funds to create their own social safety net: they assist themselves and one another by providing a replacement income when they fall ill.
- The Dutch Class Action (Financial Settlement) Act is another example. Since its inception in 2020, it has offered interest groups the option of claiming damages on behalf of numerous aggrieved parties.

The government can support these indirect forms of personal control by addressing the weaknesses of cooperatives and citizen collectives. Here we have in mind regulations concerning financing, and legislation that makes it easy to set up cooperatives.

Collective control: appealing and sound government plans

The final kind of control is collective control. By that we mean the extent to which citizens – as a political community taken as a whole – have control of our shared future in this country. Much of the recent academic research into societal discontent is about the observed lack of collective control. The public is witnessing an accumulation of crises, ranging from the housing shortage to nitrogen issues, and their perception is that domestic politics is no longer in a position to do anything about these problems.

The WRR is not offering solutions to these various crises in this report. Instead, we can make this recommendation: invest in plans to address these crises that will capture the public’s imagination while being sound and reliable at the same time. These plans must be appealing because they offer prospects for a genuinely better future, and sound because they are based on the best possible knowledge of how the world works. Plans of this kind are not only required

to address the actual issues themselves; they can also have an important psychological effect. Simply knowing that we as a society have a plan to address our problems can take the edge off feelings of powerlessness and discontent. Subjects that lend themselves to this include the spatial planning of the Netherlands, dealing with migration, and changing society in line with the impact of climate change.

Personal control of life as a guiding ideal

This is not the standard advisory report that produces specific policy recommendations. This report is essentially about a different way of seeing things and thinking about them, namely one that begins with individual people, their perceptions and their feelings. In essence, it is about dividing responsibilities between the government and the public. In recent years, politics has been preoccupied with uncertainty and discontent. It sometimes seems as though it is the government's responsibility to eliminate all insecurity and uncertainty that citizens may have to contend with.

This is an impossible task. The suggestion that the government would be able to deliver on this is a recipe for disappointment. To some extent, uncertainty and setbacks are part of life, and people are responsible for dealing with them as best they can. But that does not mean that government is discharged from having any responsibility at all. The inherent unpredictability and capriciousness of the world are absolutely no justification for a policy response along the lines of 'get used to it' and 'deal with it'. The crux of the matter is 'personal control'. Thus far, that concept has been virtually absent in the debate. The WRR argues that this must change. When all is said and done, it is about citizens' ability to have personal control of their lives so that they can deal with life's inevitable uncertainties and take steps towards achieving their life goals.

And this is where the government unequivocally gets involved. After all, having personal control of one's life requires not only that people themselves have certain opportunities, resources and rights. It also requires collective facilities, such as a properly functioning state under the rule of law, good education, good healthcare, accessible and effective legal protection and good social services. And when it comes to social uncertainties that are beyond the control of individual citizens, such as climate change, spatial planning in our country or migration, it will have to be the government itself that ensures it has sufficient clout to control the world we live in. Perhaps the time has come to replace the discourse on 'individual responsibility' with a discourse on 'shared responsibility', with 'personal control' as the guiding ideal.

Visual summary

Personal control

The importance to society of personal control

Personal control: the extent to which people are able to achieve the outcomes in life that they strive for through their own actions

Current situation

Large swathes of the public are insecure and feel they lack control of their lives.



Poorer health



Societal discontent



Distorted perceptions

Thinking in terms of personal control

How can people take the reins and control their lives as much as possible? What resources, opportunities and rights must they have to achieve this?



Preferred situation

The government must put more effort into strengthening citizens' personal control when making and implementing policies.



Direct control: more opportunities for individual personal control



Indirect control: personal control through associations and representing collective interests



Collective control: appealing and sound government plans

Personal control

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of personal control

Large swathes of the public are very insecure and feel they have limited control of their lives. In this report, the WRR demonstrates that the combination of insecurity and a lack of control can lead to poorer health, is a source of societal unease and is associated with perceptions and convictions that may be at odds with the democratic state under the rule of law.

The key message of the report therefore is that, when making and implementing policies, the government should put more effort into strengthening the personal control that members of the public have. By this we mean people's ability to influence what they are looking for in life, such as having a job they enjoy, earning enough income or having a good living environment.

With this report, the WRR invites policymakers to consider policy from a personal control point of view: how can the government give citizens greater personal control so that they can take steps towards achieving their life goals?