

CBS Publication

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The Dutch Caribbean 15 years after the dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles

About this publication

In the wake of the constitutional reform of the Dutch Caribbean in 2010, we compare the six constituent islands. The topics under review are population, work, education, economics and tourism. Alongside the current situation, we consider the changes over the years 2010- 2025.

* The authors are grateful to Sabrina de Regt for her contribution to this article.

** This article is also available in Dutch and Papiamentu.

1. Introduction

On 10 October 2010, a constitutional reform of the Kingdom of the Netherlands took place. On that date, the country the 'Netherlands Antilles' was dissolved. At the time, the Netherlands Antilles consisted of five islands: Curaçao, St Maarten, Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba. Aruba was previously also part of the Netherlands Antilles, but in 1986 was granted status aparte. This meant that it became an independent country, but was still part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Since the constitutional transition in 2010, the Kingdom of the Netherlands has consisted of four countries: Curaçao, Aruba, St Maarten and the Netherlands. The former group of countries are also abbreviated as the 'CAS countries'. The country of the Netherlands consists of a European part and a Caribbean part. The Caribbean Netherlands comprises the public entities of Bonaire, St Eustatius (English: Statia) and Saba. These three islands are also referred to as 'special municipalities' and by the abbreviation the 'BES islands'. These six islands are known collectively as the Dutch Caribbean.

Since the constitutional reform came into effect on 10 October 2010, Statistics Netherlands (CBS) has been responsible for providing statistical information on the three islands of the Caribbean Netherlands (Bonaire, Saba and St Eustatius). In order to fulfil this responsibility, a separate multi-annual programme for the Caribbean Netherlands has also been drafted (CBS, 2023).

CBS also publishes periodic figures for the Caribbean Netherlands on a broad range of subjects at [StatLine](#).

The CAS countries each have their own statistics agency: [Central Bureau of Statistics Curaçao](#), [Central Bureau of Statistics Aruba](#) and on St Maarten the [Department of Statistics](#).

Since the constitutional reform, CBS text based publications on the Dutch Caribbean have also been entirely focused on the Caribbean Netherlands, with a few exceptions (Hermans and Kösters, 2019). For the public in the European part of the Kingdom, this also means that relatively little is written in the press about statistical developments in the CAS countries. On the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary of the current constitutional arrangement, it was therefore decided to take a closer look at all six islands that originally made up the Netherlands Antilles. This article is the result. It focuses on the current position of the six islands in terms of population, language, labour force participation, economic prosperity, etc., as well as how they have developed over the past fifteen years.

The figures used for the CAS countries are derived from the statistics agencies listed above. Not all figures were available for all countries. Moreover, there are some differences in terms of the methods used and reporting years. We have not attempted to quantify the effect of different methods. No analysis is offered of the causes of differences in developments, but here and there explanations are cited from the literature. What remains is a picture of the differences (and similarities) between the islands, with a small caveat with regard to the comparability of the figures presented. The article is aimed at anyone who wishes to explore the six islands based on the primary socio- economic data.

Chapter 2 describes the data sources and research method used. Chapter 3 considers the population sizes of the six islands and how they have changed over the past fifteen years. It also discusses the population composition, the languages spoken and the religions of the inhabitants. Chapter 4 covers labour force participation and educational attainment. Chapter 5 focuses on economics: how big are the economies, how have they changed over time and how are they structured? This chapter also looks at tourism and inflation. The final chapter, the conclusion, lists the main findings.

2. Data and methods

Because, as noted, there are at least four different sources for all the charts in chapters 2, 3 and 4, Section 2.1. shows where the information has been obtained. The periods the figures relate to and/or the reference dates for the data are specified in the charts themselves.

In many cases, no annual data are available for the CAS countries. For this reason, for a number of indicators it has been decided to only show the status in 2025 and in 2011 (or another available year around the constitutional reform). For indicators for which annual figures are available, the figures are shown.

2.1 Sources used for each indicator

Population, size and changes over time

[Caribbean Netherlands, population Curaçao, population Aruba, population](#) and DBSB, 30 June 2025
[St Maarten, population](#)

Gender and age

[Caribbean Netherlands, Gender and age Curaçao, Gender and age](#) and [Curaçao, age \(Census 2011\)](#) [Aruba, Gender and age](#) and DBSB, 30 June 2025
[St Maarten, Gender and age \(Census 2011 and Census 2022\)](#) and Statistics Bureau St Maarten

Country of birth

[Caribbean Netherlands, country of birth Curaçao, country of birth \(Census 2011\)](#) and [Curaçao, country of birth \(Census 2023\)](#) [Aruba, country of birth](#) and DBSB, 30 June 2025
[St Maarten, country of birth \(Census 2022 & Census 2011\)](#)

Marital status

[Caribbean Netherlands, marital status Curaçao, marital status \(Census 2011\)](#) and [Curaçao, marital status \(Census 2023\)](#) [Aruba, marital status](#) and DBSB, 30 June 2025
[St Maarten, marital status \(Census 2011\)](#) and Statistics Bureau St Maarten

Languages

[Caribbean Netherlands, languages and Omnibus survey Curaçao, languages \(Census 2011\)](#) and [Curaçao, languages \(Census 2023\)](#) Aruba: not available
[St Maarten, languages \(Census 2022\)](#)

Religion

[Caribbean Netherlands, religion Curaçao, religion Aruba, country of birth](#) and DBSB, 30 June 2025
[St Maarten, religion \(Census 2022 & Census 2011\)](#) and Statistics Bureau St Maarten

Net labour participation rate

[Caribbean Netherlands, net labour participation rate Curaçao, net labour participation rate](#) and [Curaçao, net labour participation rate](#) [Aruba, net labour participation rate](#)
[St Maarten, net labour participation rate](#)

Unemployment

Caribbean Netherlands, unemployment

[Curaçao, unemployment](#) and [Curaçao, unemployment](#) [Aruba, unemployment](#)
[St Maarten, unemployment](#) and [St Maarten, unemployment \(Census 2022\)](#)

Level of education

[Caribbean Netherlands, highest level of education attained](#) and Statistics

Bureau Curaçao [Curaçao, level of education](#)

[Aruba, level of education](#)

St Maarten: Statistics Bureau St Maarten

GDP and change in GDP overtime

Caribbean Netherlands, gross domestic product

(GDP) [Curaçao, gross domestic product \(GDP\)](#)

[Aruba, gross domestic product \(GDP\)](#)

[St Maarten, gross domestic product \(GDP\)](#)

Gross added value by industry or sector

~~Bonaire, gross added value by industry or sector~~

Saba and St Eustatius: not available

[Curaçao, gross added value by industry or](#)

[sector](#) [Aruba, gross added value by](#)

[industry or sector](#)

[St Maarten, gross added value by industry or sector](#)

Tourism

[Bonaire, tourism](#)

Saba and St Eustatius: not

available [Curaçao, tourism](#)

[Aruba, tourism](#)

[St Maarten, tourism](#)

Inflation

[Caribbean Netherlands, consumer price index](#)

[\(CPI\)](#) [Curaçao, consumer price index \(CPI\)](#)

[Aruba, consumer price index \(CPI\)](#)

[St Maarten, consumer price index \(CPI\)](#)

3. Population

This chapter covers the population in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. First, we consider the number of inhabitants, along with changes to that number over the past fifteen years. We then discuss the composition of the population, as well as the languages spoken and the religion practised on the islands. Where there has been a clear development in the fifteen years since the constitutional reform, the figures for 2010 or 2011 are also shown, if available.

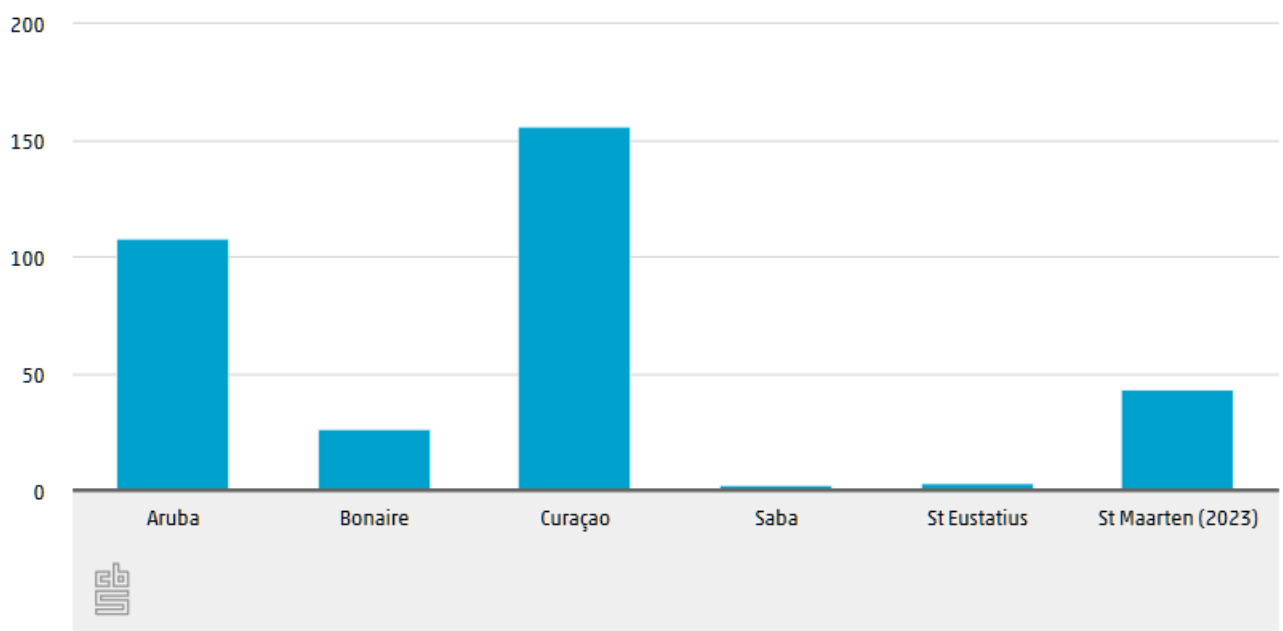
3.1 Population size

In 2025, there were approximately 340 thousand people living in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Chart 3.1.1). That is slightly less than the population of the city of Utrecht. Of the CAS countries, Curaçao has the highest number of inhabitants – a little over 156 thousand in 2025. The population of Aruba is slightly more than two-thirds that of Curaçao, at over 108 thousand. St Maarten (specifically, the Dutch part of the island) had slightly fewer than 43 thousand inhabitants in 2023. That is more than the total population of the Caribbean Netherlands.

Of the BES islands, Bonaire has the highest number of inhabitants. On 1 January 2025, it was home to more than 26 thousand people. At the start of 2025, there were more than 3 thousand people living on St Eustatius and just over 2 thousand on Saba. The fact that the three islands with the most inhabitants also have the most autonomy is not coincidental: population size played a role in the constitutional reform. The number of inhabitants on St Maarten is not available after 2023, which is why the population of 2023 is given as the most recent figure.

3.1.1 Population, 1 January 2025¹⁾

x 1,000 residents



¹⁾ The figures for Aruba relate to the number of residents at the end of the previous year

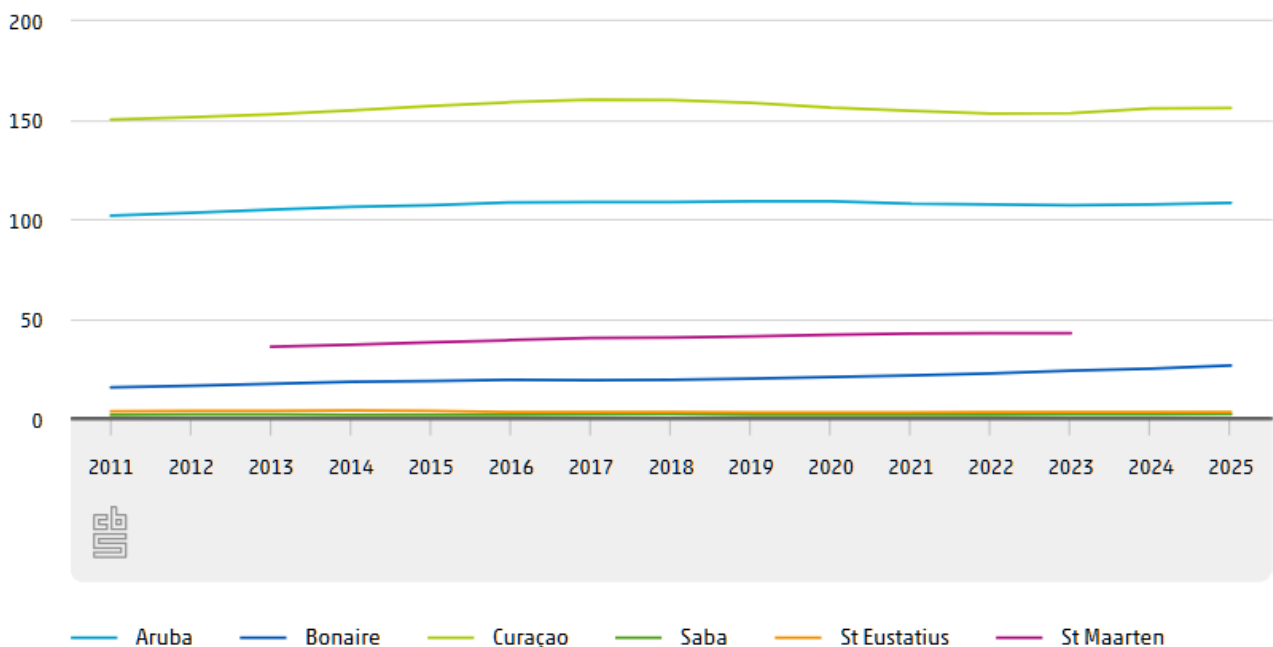
Changes in population size

Chart 3.1.2 shows that the populations of most of the islands have increased slightly over the past fifteen years; only St Eustatius has slightly fewer inhabitants today than in 2011. That decrease is related to an administrative clean-up. At this juncture, it is impossible to know whether the population contracted or actually grew. Bonaire represents an exception in a different sense: the population of this island grew relatively quickly in this period. In 2011, it was home to slightly more than 15 thousand people, while by 2025 that number had risen to 26.6 thousand, an increase of nearly 70%. The growth is seen in all age categories, but it is notable that the population groups aged 60 and over have more than doubled in size compared to 2011. See also Chart 3.2.2. The increase in the population of Bonaire is largely attributable to the fact that more people have moved to the island than have left (CBS, 2025a).

The chart below shows changes in the population sizes of the six islands. Given that the population of Curaçao is significantly larger than, for example, that of St Eustatius and Saba, the development of the latter two islands is less easy to distinguish. If you click on a particular island in the legend at the bottom of the chart, you can deselect it. For example, if you click on Curaçao at the bottom of the chart, that island will not be displayed. In this way, the islands can be selected as desired, showing the development of the small islands more clearly.

3.1.2 Population change, 1 January ¹⁾

x 1,000 residents



¹⁾ The figures for Aruba relate to the number of residents at the end of the previous year

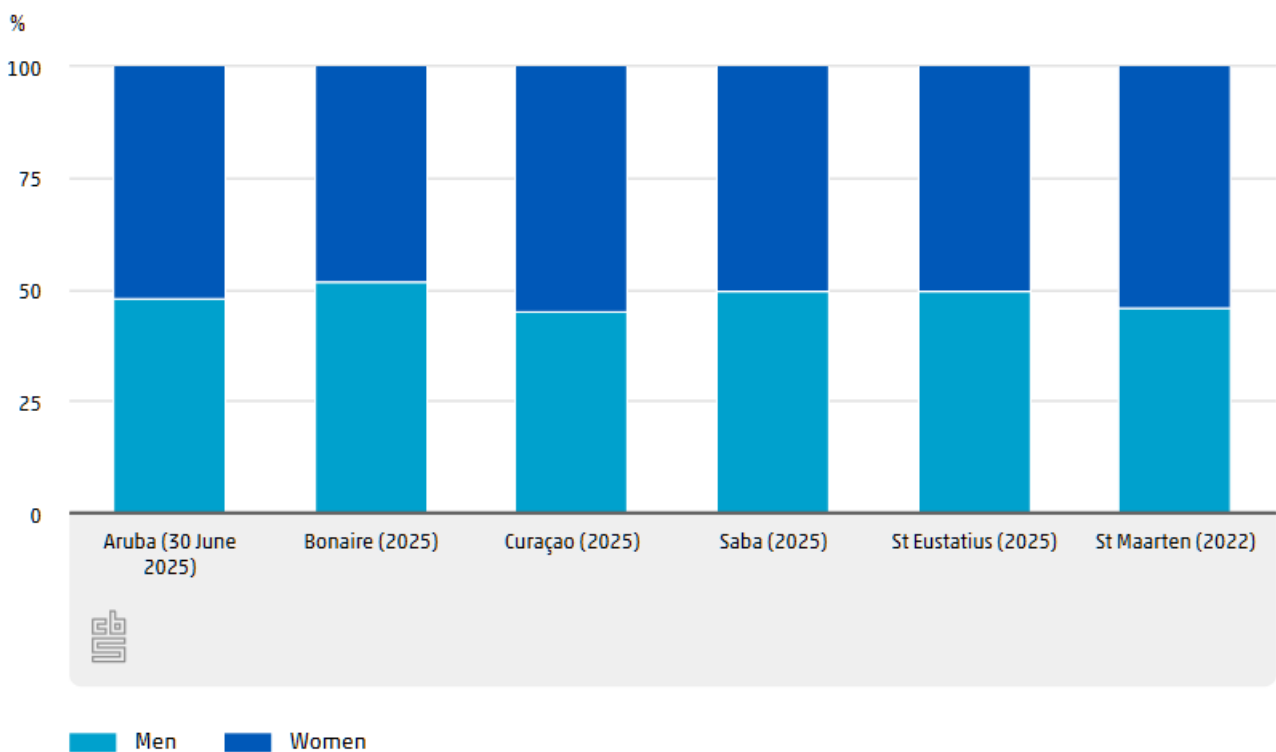
The total population of the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands has grown by slightly less than 10% over the past fifteen years, from approximately 317 thousand in 2011 to 340 thousand in 2025.

3.2 Population composition

Gender

Chart 3.2.1 reveals that the ratio of men to women is precisely equal on St Eustatius and Saba in 2025. There are slightly more women than men on Curaçao, St Maarten and Aruba (55% versus 52%), while the situation on Bonaire is reversed. This picture has changed little over the past fifteen years. In [2011](#), the share of men was a single percentage point higher for the BES than in 2025.

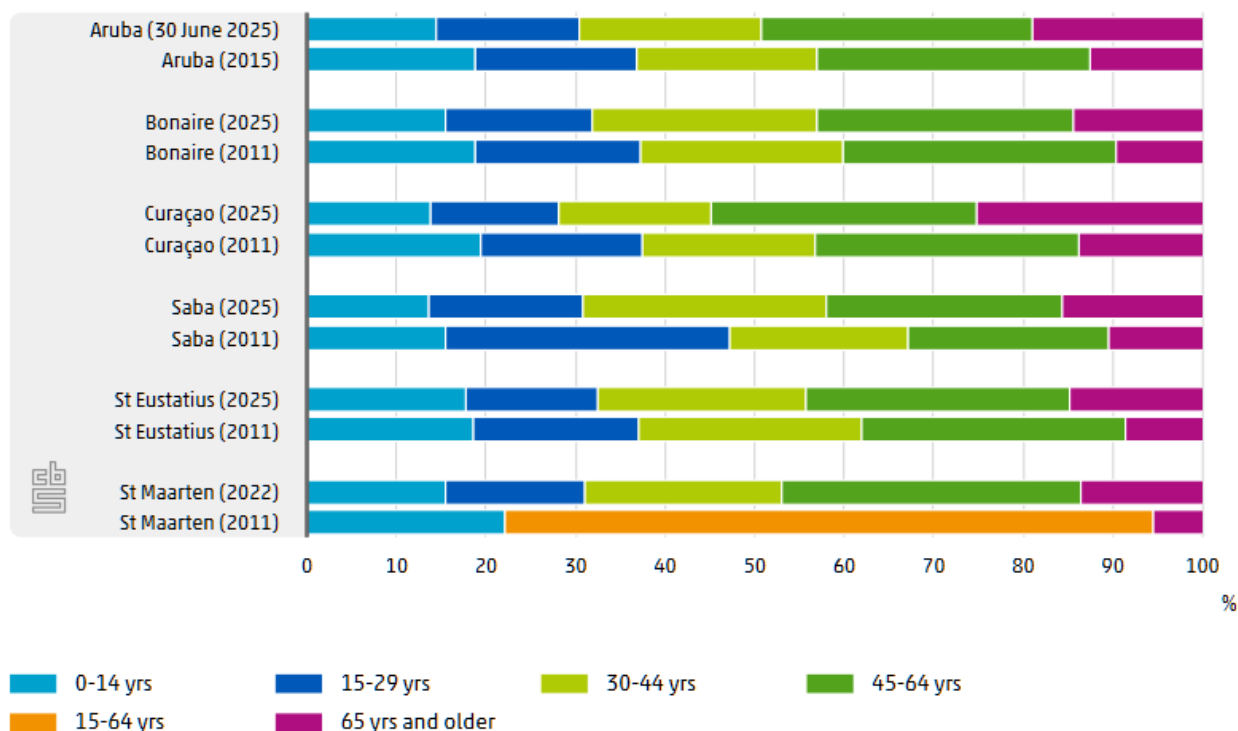
3.2.1 Distribution of residents, by gender, 2025



Age

Curaçao (and to a lesser extent Aruba) has a relatively large proportion of older inhabitants. Chart 3.2.2 shows that a quarter of residents there are aged 65 or over. By contrast, the share of older people is much lower for the BES islands: there, around 15% of the population are aged 65 or over. There has been significant ageing of the populations of all the islands over the past ten to fifteen years. The process has been particularly rapid on Curaçao. In 2011, only 13.8% of the population there were aged sixty-five or over; as stated, by 2025 that share had grown to slightly over a quarter. In 2011, only approximately 10% of the population of the BES islands were older than 65. The role of migration in the changing age profile of the population has not been investigated.

3.2.2 Distribution of residents by age



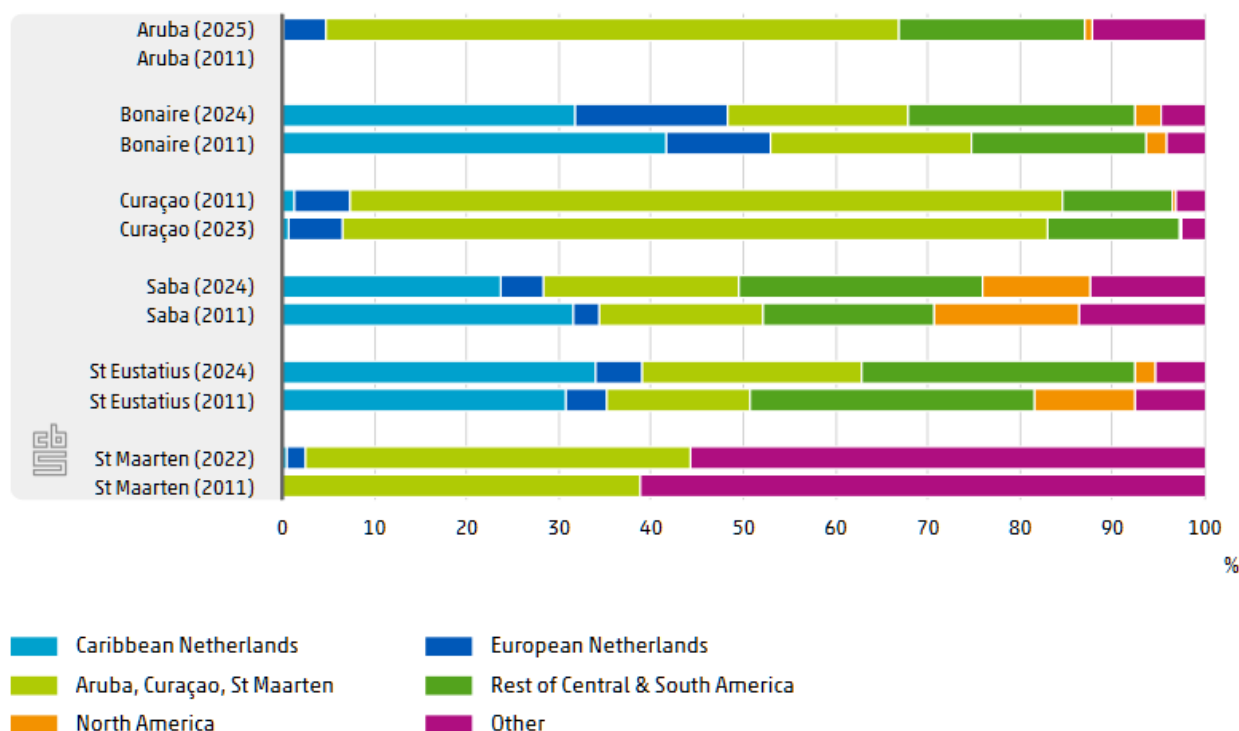
Country of birth

There are major differences between the six islands in terms of the country of birth of their inhabitants (see Chart 3.2.3). The classification used is not the same for all sources. For example, in the source for St Maarten (2022), no distinction is drawn between North and South America. For this reason, they both fall under the 'other' category. Conversely, in 2011, the only distinction made was between 'the former Netherlands Antilles and Aruba' and 'other'. For Aruba, countries with fewer than 250 people born in that country fell under the 'other' category in the source. As a result, the percentage given for Aruban inhabitants born in one of the BES islands may be understated. No figures were available for 2011.

For Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba, in 2024 (the most recent reporting year), only approximately one-third of inhabitants were actually born within the BES area. A quarter originated from other parts of South and Central America, and another quarter from one of the CAS countries. For Aruba and Curaçao, on the other hand, it is notable that the majority of the population were born in the CAS countries. Of the population of Bonaire, 17% were born in the European Netherlands. This percentage is significantly higher than for the other islands.

If we compare the composition of the population in 2024 with that in 2011, we note that on Bonaire and Saba, the percentage of inhabitants born in the Caribbean Netherlands has fallen: from 41.7% to 31.9% and from 31.7% to 23.7%, respectively. For Bonaire, both the share of persons born in the European Netherlands and the share of persons born in Central and South America have risen; for Saba, the change is primarily due to an increase in the latter group. By contrast, on St Eustatius, the share of inhabitants born in the Caribbean Netherlands has actually increased slightly (by 3.2%) relative to 2011.

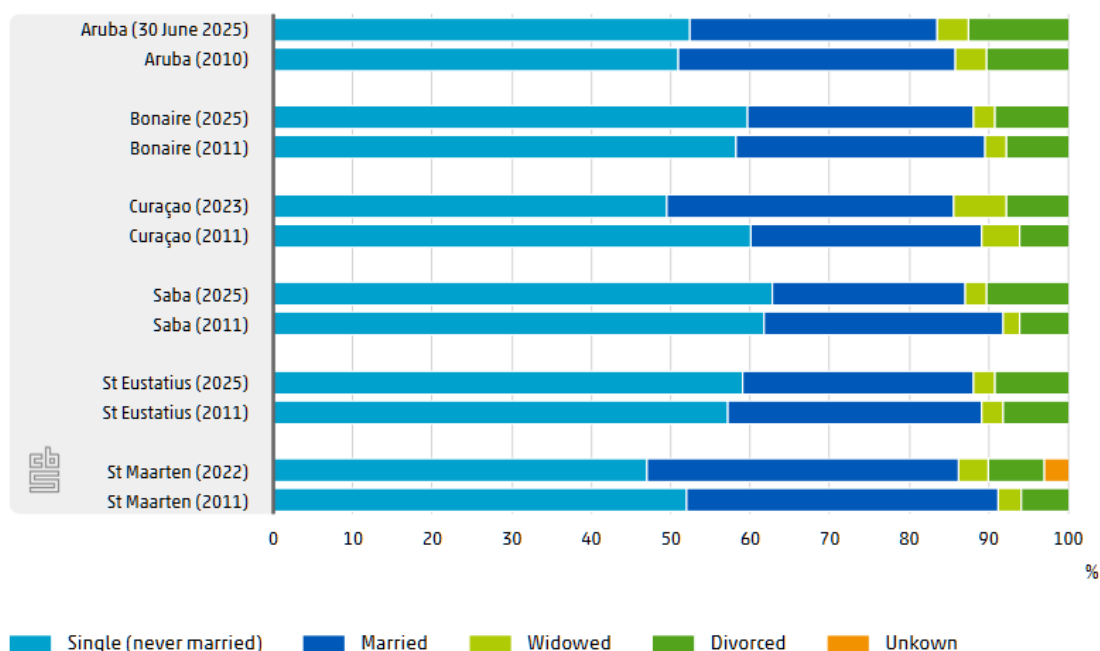
3.2.3 Distribution of residents, by country / region of birth



Marital status

The marital status of inhabitants is defined by four categories; married, unmarried, divorced and widowed. Where the source included a category of 'registered partner', the relevant numbers have been added to the 'married' category. Chart 3.2.4 shows that, although the percentages of both married and divorced inhabitants are slightly higher on Curaçao and Aruba than on the BES islands, overall, the distribution in 2025 is comparable for the six islands. The share of married inhabitants has fallen over time on the BES islands, whereas on Curaçao it has actually increased slightly. However, for all islands, an increase is visible in the share of divorced inhabitants.

3.2.4 Distribution of residents by marital status



3.3 Languages

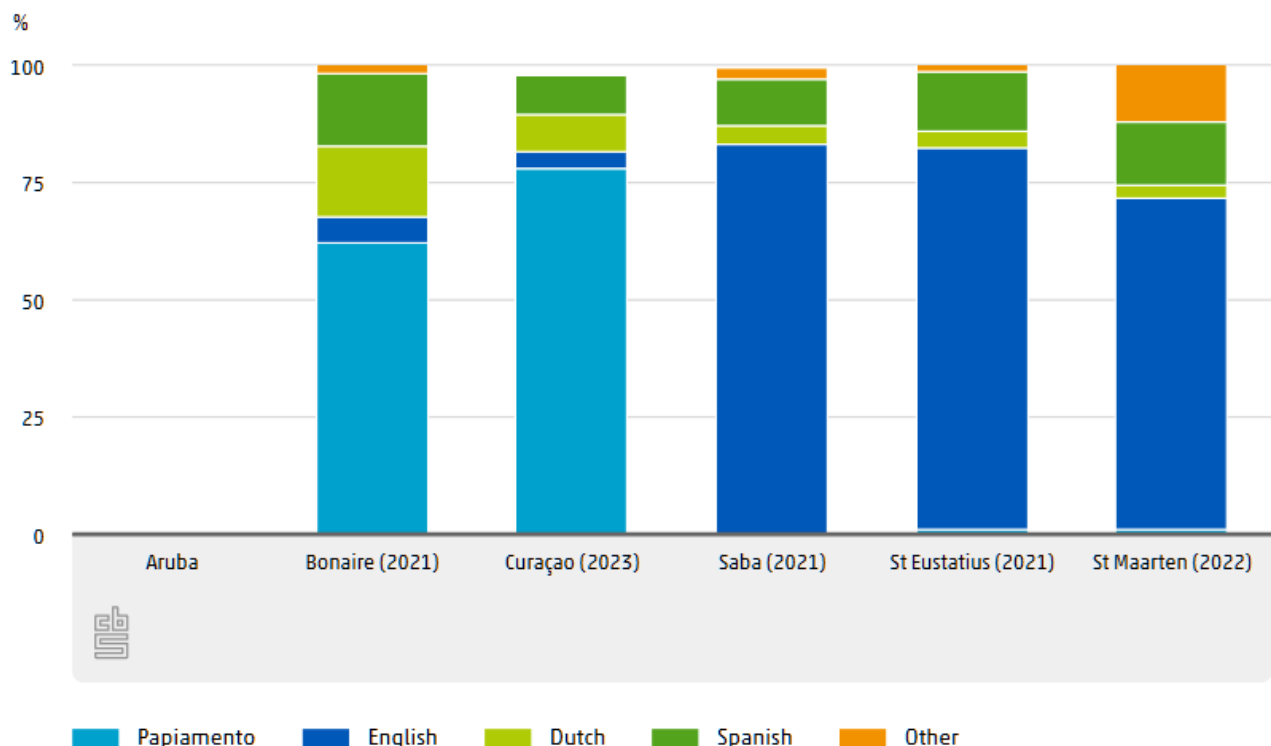
Multiple languages are spoken in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The official languages and the most commonly spoken languages differ from island to island. Broadly speaking, the language spoken on three windward islands is English and on the three leeward islands it is Papiamentu/Papiamentu. The latter language has two main variants: the one spoken on Aruba is known as Papiamentu, the one spoken on Bonaire and Curaçao is known as Papiamentu. Papiamentu has an etymologically-based spelling, whereas Papiamentu is spelled phonetically. Papiamentu/Papiamentu is a unique language originating from a mixture of different languages, including Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, English and various African languages.

Official languages and commonly spoken languages

On Curaçao, the official languages are English, Dutch and Papiamentu. On Aruba, Dutch and Papiamentu are the official languages, while on St Maarten they are English and Dutch. On the BES islands, Dutch is the official language. Alongside Dutch, Papiamentu and English are recognised as official languages. This means that these languages may be used in education, contacts with the authorities and law.

The diversity of languages is also revealed when we look at the languages actually spoken on the islands. In the Omnibus survey of 2021 (CBS, 2021), CBS asked people on the BES islands which language or languages they speak. Multiple answers were possible (Papiamentu/Papiamentu, English, Dutch, Spanish and Other). If the respondent spoke more than one language, they were asked which one they used most. Because these figures are based on a sample survey, they contain a margin of error. The results of the survey are shown in Chart 3.3.1.

3.3.1 Language most often spoken



On St Eustatius, Saba and St Maarten, English is the main language spoken. On St Maarten, it is the primary language for approximately 70% of the respondents; on St Eustatius and Saba, the equivalent figure is over 80%. On Curaçao, Papiamentu is the main language spoken by nearly 80% of the population (CBS Curaçao, 2023a); on Bonaire slightly over 60% of the inhabitants use it as their main language. On Bonaire, the most common language is the least dominant.

Correlation between locations of islands and languages spoken

The islands of the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands were traditionally divided into 'Leeward islands' and 'Windward islands'. The Leeward islands, also known as the ABC islands, are Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao. The Windward islands, also known as the SSS islands, are St Maarten, St Eustatius and Saba. The terms refer to their location in relation to the trade winds. The Leeward islands lie off the coast of the South American country of Venezuela. The Windward islands are located more than 800 kilometres further north in the Caribbean Sea. The figures in Chart 3.3.1 display a clear correlation between the languages spoken and the locations of the islands. On the leeward islands (Bonaire and Curaçao), Papiamentu is a dominant language, while on the windward islands (St Maarten, St Eustatius and Saba) it is English.

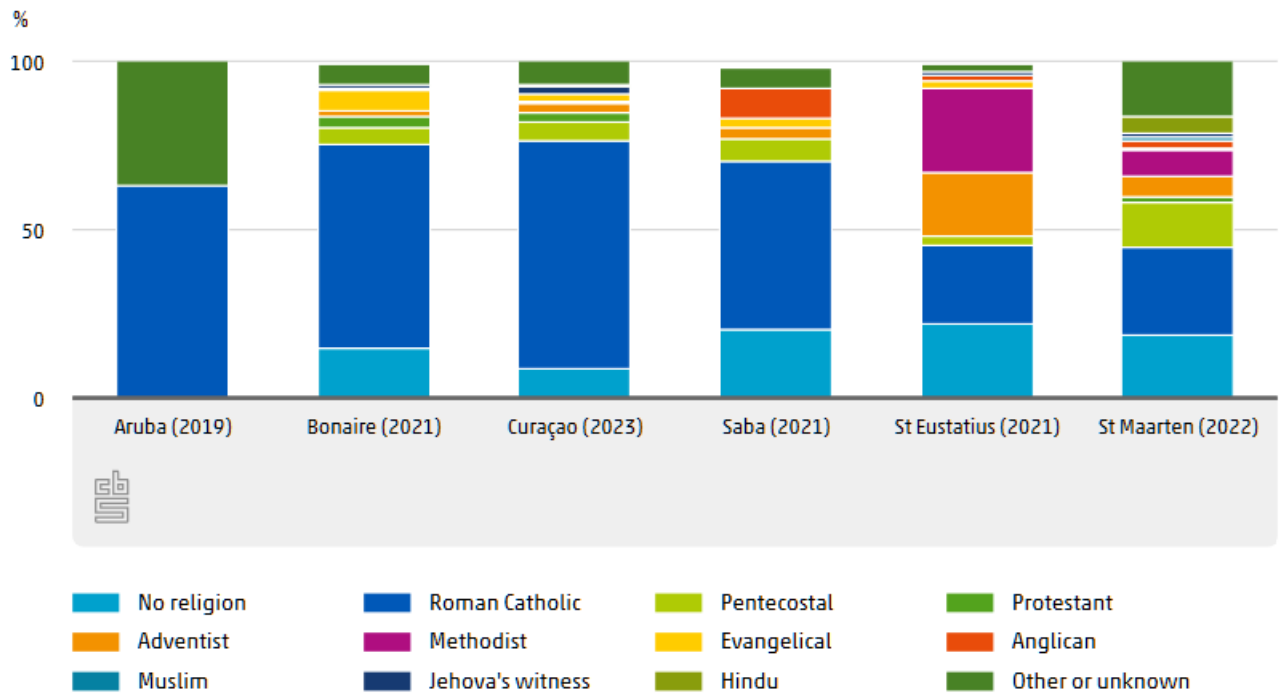
Multiple languages

Alongside the most commonly used languages, information is also available about which other languages the inhabitants of the islands speak. On Bonaire, more than 90% of the residents speak more than one language. The survey results show that, although Papiamentu is the main language spoken, more than three-quarters of people on Bonaire also speak English and Dutch. On St Eustatius and Saba, more than half the population speak more than one language (CBS, 2022a). Here, Papiamentu/Papiamentu is less commonly spoken, but approximately a third of the population speak Dutch and Spanish (CBS, 2022b).

3.4 Religion

The majority of the population of the Caribbean Netherlands, Curaçao and Aruba consider themselves to be religious. Residents are most likely to say they do not adhere to any religion on St Eustatius and Saba (22.1% and 20.4%, respectively). Catholicism is by far the biggest religion on all the islands. On the larger islands, the share of Roman Catholics is over 60%. There do not appear to have been any major shifts since 2011, except that on all the islands (for which the information is available), a larger share of the population indicated that they did not adhere to any religion in 2025.

3.4.1 Religion¹⁾



¹⁾ For Aruba, the source only includes Roman Catholic/Others or Unknown/No religion

4. Labour and education

This chapter discusses the labour market in the Dutch Caribbean. We look at how many people are in work and how high unemployment is, and how this has changed over time. We also consider the level of education of the inhabitants.

4.1 Labour force participation and unemployment

When presenting figures about the labour market, the population is often divided into three categories:

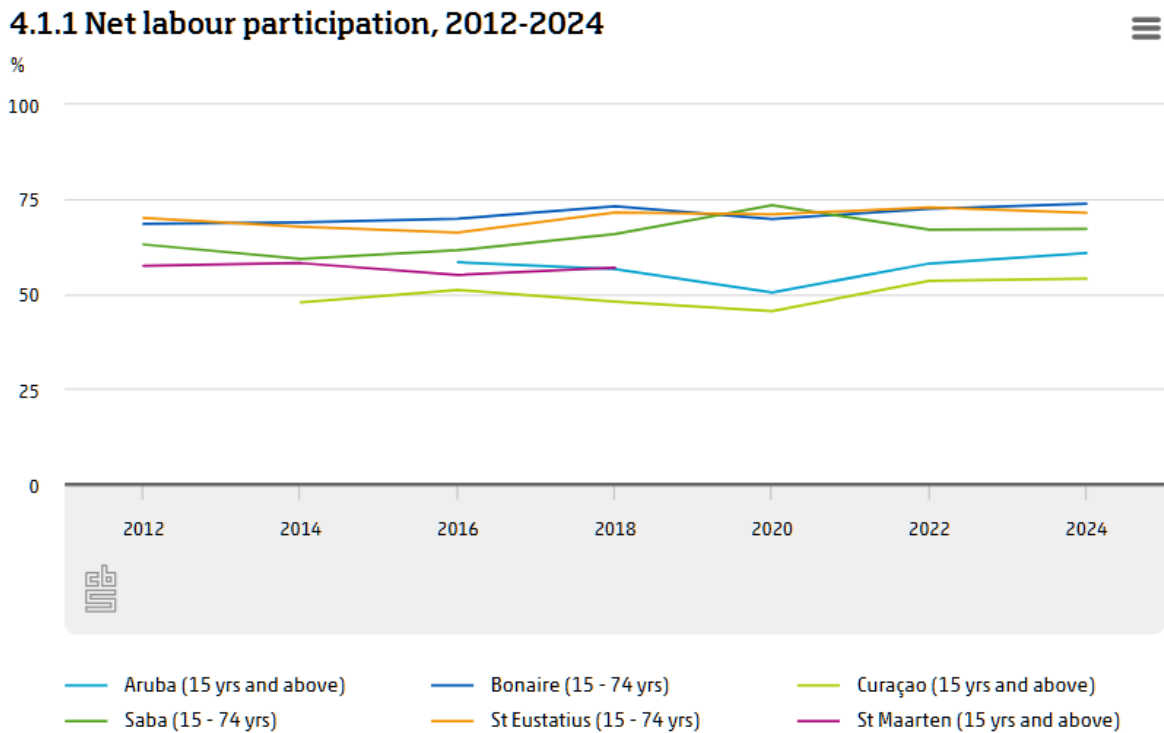
1. The employed labour force. This consists of individuals who are in paid employment.
2. The unemployed labour force. Those who are not in paid employment but are actively seeking work and immediately available for work.
3. The non-working population. This consists of individuals who are not in paid employment, are actively seeking and immediately available for work – for example, because they are incapacitated for work or have family care responsibilities.

The employed and unemployed categories combined make up the active labour force. On the BES islands, it is common to limit the ages of the three categories to a range from 15 to 74. The upper limit is not used in the CAS countries. The institutional population (CBS, 2022) – residents of nursing homes and prisons, for example – is not included in the total. Whether or not this group is counted for the CAS countries is unclear.

Net labour force participation rate

The percentage of the population in paid employment is known as the net labour force participation rate. This is the share of the employed labour force within the total population (the active labour force and the non-working population added together).

Chart 4.1.1 shows the net labour force participation rate for the six islands for the period from 2012 to 2024. It should be noted that this chapter does not present a continuous development, given that the Labour Force Survey in the Caribbean Netherlands (Arbeidskrachtenonderzoek in Caribisch Nederland) is conducted biennially rather than annually. For St Maarten, the same years are not available as is the case for the other islands. This is why the figure shows data for 2011 for St Maarten under 2012, data for 2013 under 2014 and data for 2017 under 2016.

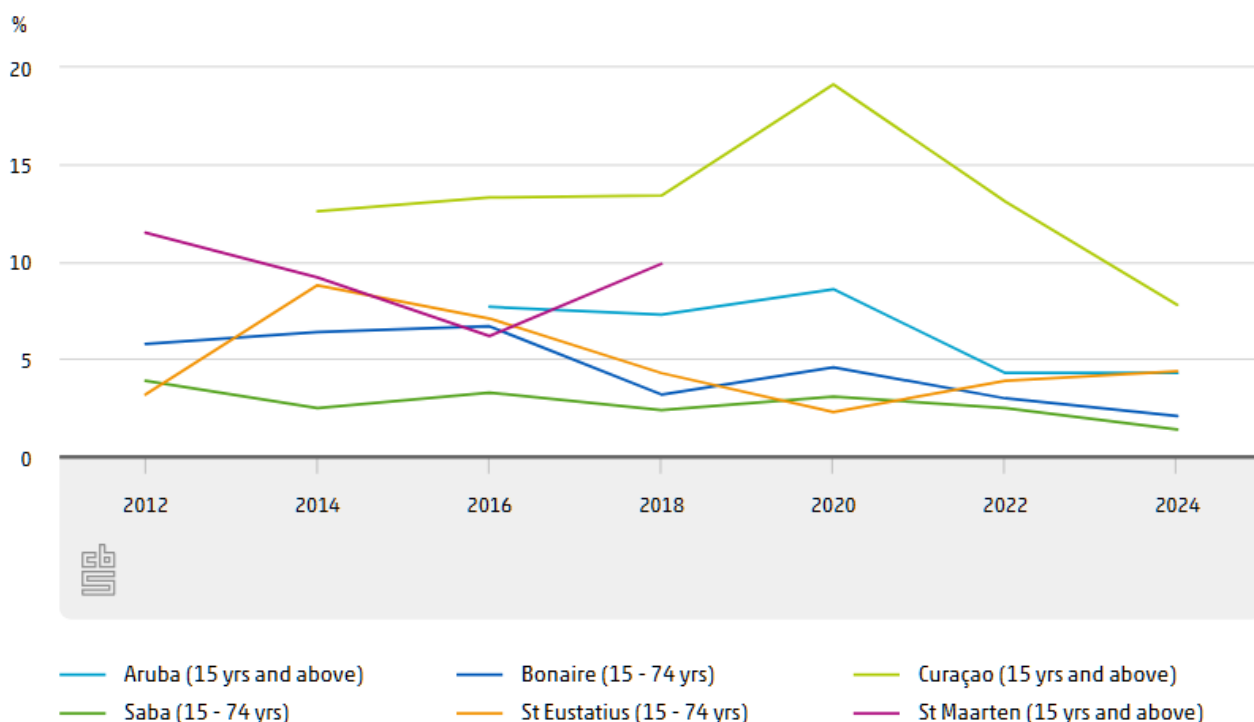


On all six islands, the majority of the population are in paid employment. There can be various [reasons](#) why people are not able or willing to work. On Bonaire and St Eustatius, the net labour force participation rate was over 70% in recent years. On Saba it was slightly lower, at 67%. This is due to the fact that there is a large university on the island, which means that a proportion of the inhabitants are not part of the working population (the students). Labour force participation on Aruba and Curaçao is consistently lower than it is on the BES islands. However, comparison between the CAS countries and the BES islands is impaired by differences in the age categories used. Labour force participation was fairly stable for all the islands during the period under review.

Unemployment

Another important economic indicator is the unemployment rate. This is calculated by looking at the unemployed labour force. Chart 4.1.2 shows changes in the unemployment rate of the six islands. The age group categories used are the same as for labour force participation. As was seen above, the same years are not available for St Maarten as for the other islands. This is why the figure shows data for 2011 for St Maarten under 2012, data for 2013 under 2014 and data for 2017 under 2016.

4.1.2 Unemployment, 2012-2024



Curaçao had the highest unemployment rate throughout the period under review. It is unclear whether the different age group categories used are a factor in this. Previous studies suggested multiple reasons for the high unemployment rate on this island – for example, the general functioning of the economy on Curaçao, the heavy dependence on a limited number of industries (lack of diversification) and the functioning of the labour market (for example, bureaucratic obstacles and delays in the licensing procedure). For more information about the labour market on Curaçao, see the analysis of the labour market on Curaçao (CBS Curaçao, 2023b). Nevertheless, unemployment on this island has fallen relative to 2016, with the exception of the spike during the coronavirus pandemic. Whereas in that year the unemployment rate was over 13%, by 2024 it had fallen below 8%.

Unemployment has also fallen on Aruba and Bonaire in recent years – from more than 7% in 2016 to slightly over 4% in 2024 on Aruba, and from more than 6% in 2016 to approximately 2% in 2024 on Bonaire. Saba has had the lowest unemployment rate in virtually all years. In 2024, unemployment on the island stood at under 2%. Saba also had the lowest unemployment rate in previous research conducted by CBS (Hermans and Kösters, 2019). Unemployment on St Eustatius have been fluctuating somewhat. The economy on this island is heavily influenced by a small number of large enterprises. Their production is mainly export-oriented and dependent on the regional oil sector.

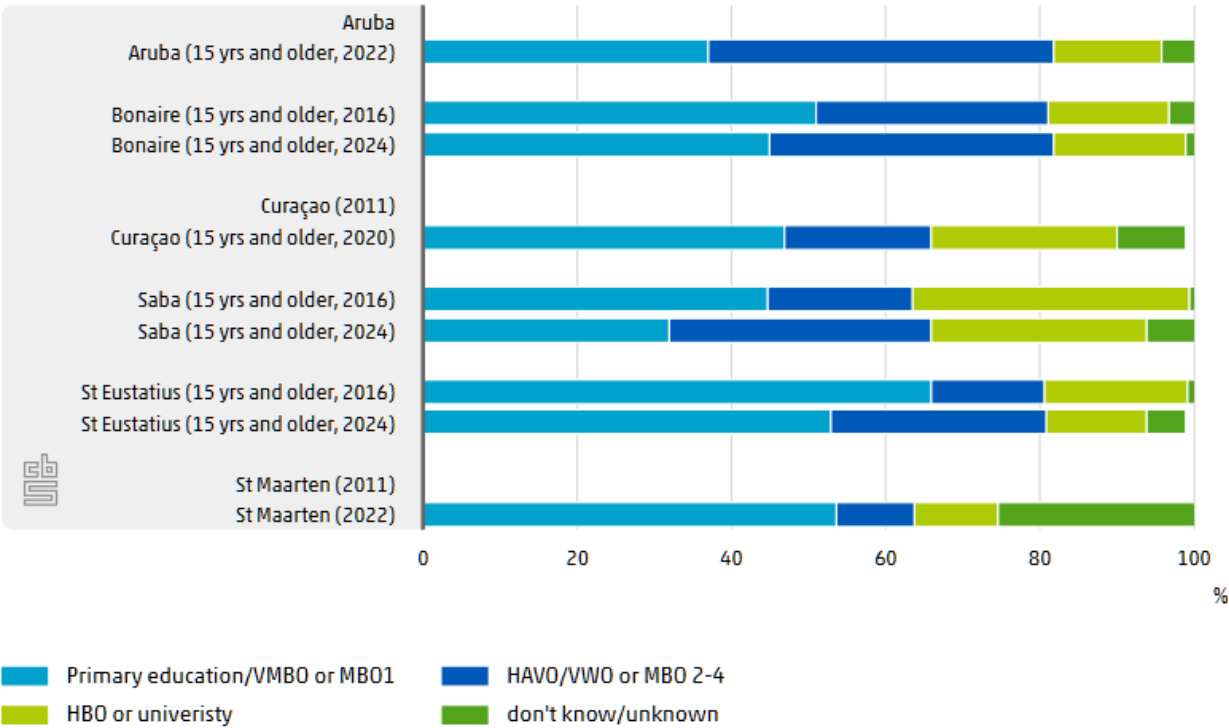
Because all the islands are popular holiday destinations, the tourism, trade and accommodation & food service sectors are those that provide the most employment. However, each island has a different sector structure. More detail on this is provided in chapter five.

4.2 Level of education

In this section, we look at the highest level of educational attainment of the inhabitants of the six islands. Chart 4.2.1 shows the highest level attained for those islands for which the information was available. The information relates to 2016 and the most recent available year: 2024.

Three categories are defined for the highest level of educational attainment: 'primary education/prevocational secondary education (VMBO) or senior secondary vocational education (MBO) 1'; 'senior general secondary education (HAVO)/pre-university education (VWO) or senior secondary vocational education (MBO) 2-4'; and 'higher vocational education (HBO) or university education'. A more approximate categorization was used for St Maarten and Curaçao.

4.2.1 Highest level of educational attainment



The most common highest level of educational attainment for residents of the islands is 'primary education/VMBO or MBO 1' – this is true for between 30% and 50% of the population on the islands of Bonaire, St Eustatius and Curaçao. Approximately 15% to 25% of residents have either an HBO or university qualification. Saba presents a different picture: the percentage of residents with an HBO or university education is relatively high here, at over a quarter. This is due to the large medical university situated on the island. Due to the rounding off of percentages in the source, not all countries add up to 100%. As a result, the figures are indicative.

The level of education of the BES islands has changed slightly since 2016. These days, a smaller share of the population have 'primary education/VMBO or MBO 1' as their highest level of educational attainment. Older figures are not known for the other islands.

A familiar problem is that young people from the islands in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands leave to study elsewhere, for example in the European Netherlands, and do not return to directly where they came from after completing their study programmes. For example, estimates suggest that hundreds of young people leave Curaçao every year to study elsewhere but that only approximately 5% return to the island after their studies (CBS Curaçao, 2023c). The most recent survey of school pupils on the BES islands (Bokern and Fernandez Beiro, 2025) also saw a large proportion indicating that they wanted to leave the island in the future to live elsewhere. This was true for 81% of young people on Bonaire, with the figure rising to 91% for Saba and St Eustatius. On all three islands, 'to complete a training course or study programme' and 'to see more of the world' were the most common reasons given for wanting to leave.

The result of the departure of these young people is that the average educational level of residents of the six islands is relatively low. By way of comparison: in the European Netherlands (CBS, 2025b), slightly over a quarter of individuals aged 15 to 75 have 'primary education/VMBO or MBO 1' as their highest level of educational attainment, approximately 41% have 'HAVO/VWO or MBO 2-4', and nearly a third have 'HBO or university education'. The permanent departure of those with HBO and university educations can have an impact on the local labour market and on the economies of the islands. It can potentially also affect the composition of the population, for example because migrants have to be hired to fill job vacancies.

5. Economy and tourism

In this chapter, we examine the economies of the six islands. How big are the economies and what levels of economic growth have been seen in recent years? What are the main industries on the different islands? Finally, we look at inflation.

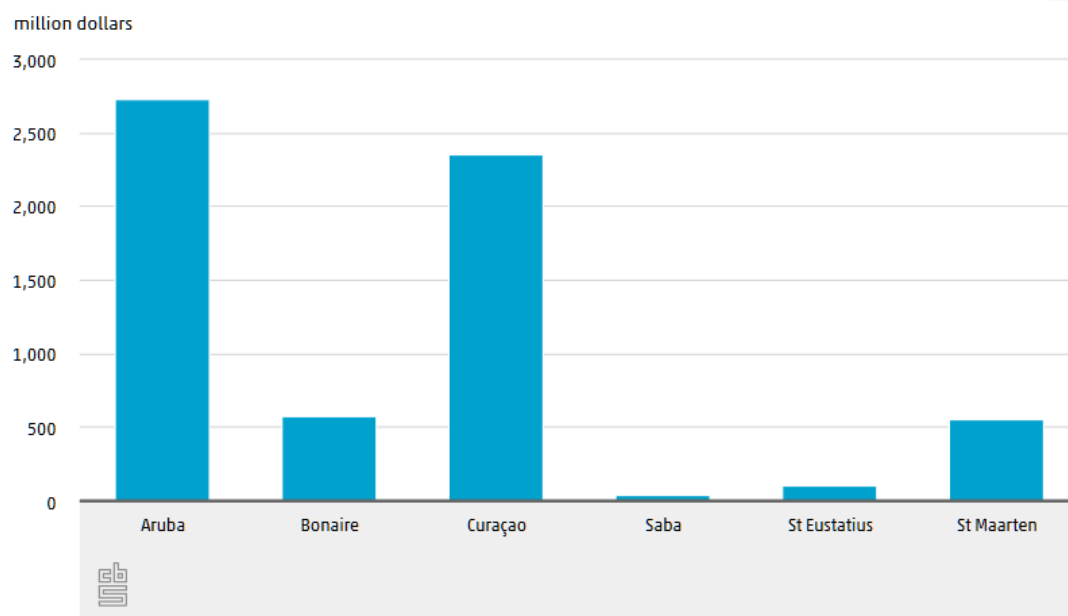
5.1 Gross domestic product

Gross domestic product (GDP) is a commonly used measure for the size of an economy. GDP is roughly equal to what is produced, earned or spent within a country. The Caribbean Netherlands Macroeconomic Context Monitor Baseline Measurement (Nulmeting monitor macro- economische context Caribisch Nederland – CBS, 2024) provides more information on how GDP is measured. Per capita GDP is a narrower measure of economic prosperity. 'Well-being' is not addressed in this article. Before considering GDP, we first discuss the differences in currencies.

Currency

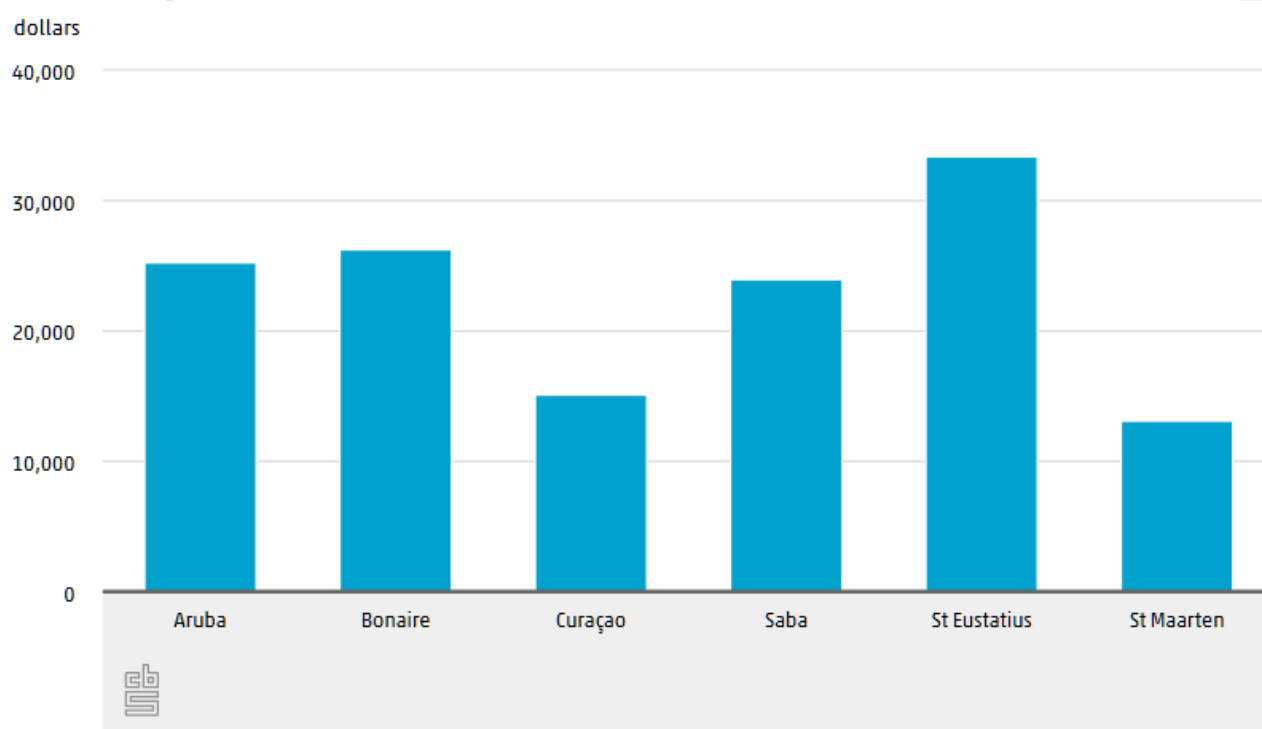
Not all of the islands use the same currency. As of 2025, the official currency of Curaçao and St Maarten is the Caribbean guilder. This is the successor to the Netherlands Antillean guilder and came into circulation on 31 March 2025. The currency of Aruba is the Aruban florin. It was introduced after Aruba gained status aparte within the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1986 (previously, the Antillean guilder was also used here). The US dollar has been the official currency on the BES islands since 1 January 2011. Tourism and trade played a role in this decision. In order to be able to compare the size of the economies of the six islands, all amounts have been converted to US dollars.

5.1.1 GDP in US dollars, 2021



As Chart 5.1.1 shows, Aruba and Curaçao have a larger economy; the other economies are much smaller. This partly reflects the size of their populations: the more inhabitants, the more people there are to produce and consume. However, this is not the only factor. For instance, although Aruba does not have the largest population, it does have the highest GDP. In order to compare prosperity levels between the islands, GDP per capita is generally used. As may be seen in Chart 5.1.2, this is by far the highest on St Eustatius (2021 figures). The levels on Bonaire, Saba and Aruba are fairly comparable, while on Curaçao and Sint Maarten they are substantially lower. The figures have not been corrected for differences in purchasing power (the equivalent of 1 US dollar buys more on one island than on another).

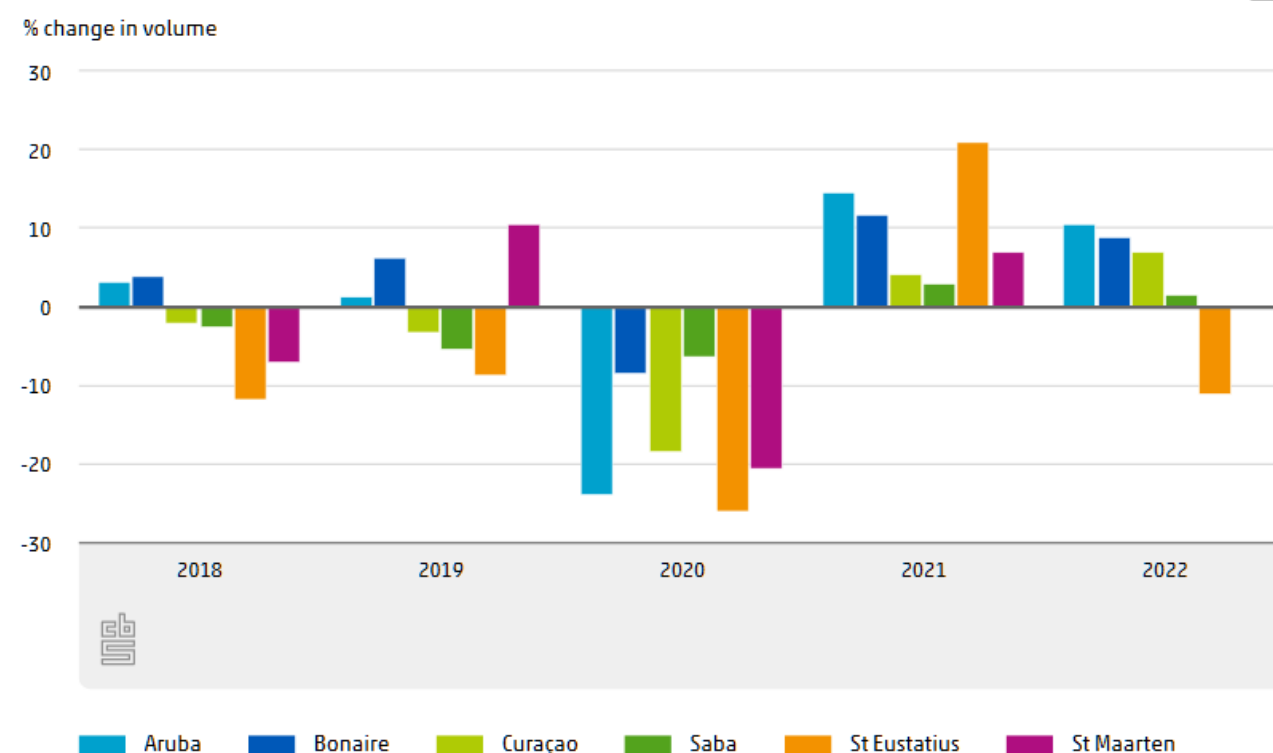
5.1.2 GDP per inhabitant, 2021



5.1 Changes in GDP

Chart 5.2.1a shows changes in the volume of GDP relative to the year before, a measure of economic development. An obvious negative outlier is the year 2020, when the economies of all six islands contracted. In that year, travel restrictions were in place due to the coronavirus pandemic, which had a major impact on tourism. However, the following year saw a strong recovery. It is striking that the economy of St Eustatius fluctuates significantly. This is related to the island's dependence on a small number of large enterprises. It also means that the per capita GDP presented in the previous section is highly dependent on the year chosen for comparison.

5.2.1a. GDP, 2018-2022

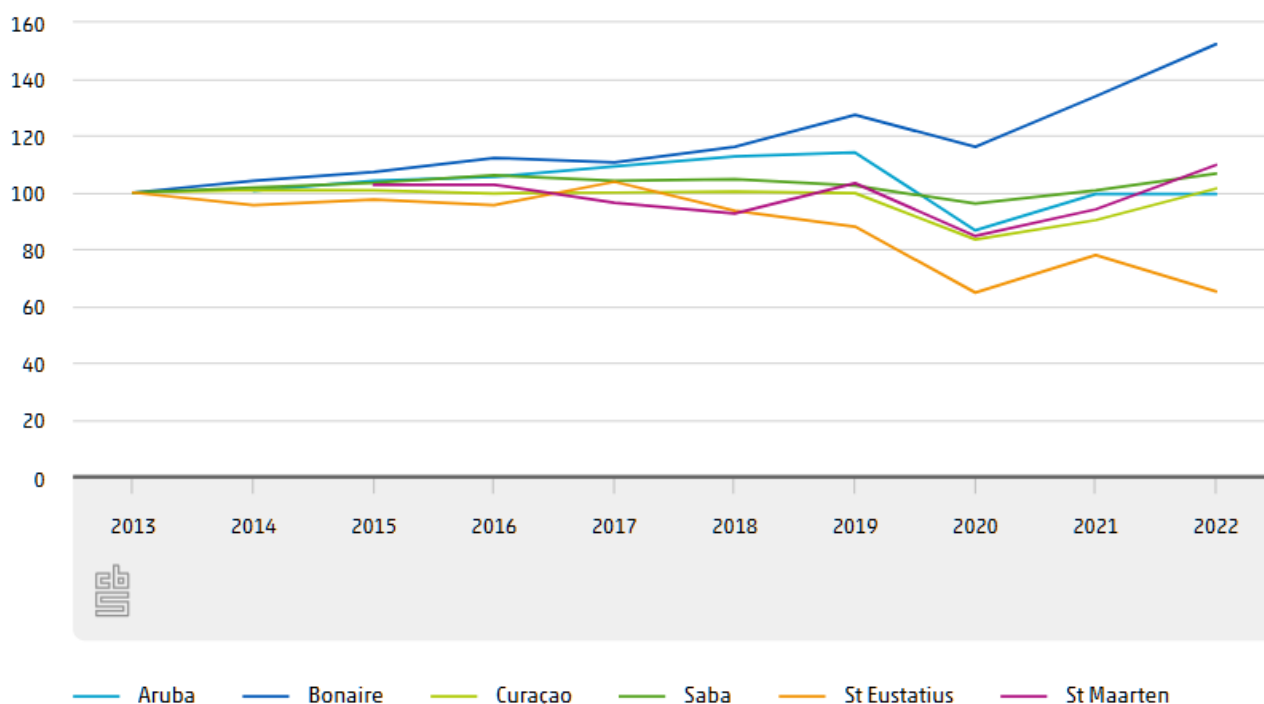


In order to gain more insight into growth over the longer term, the changes in GDP volumes have been indexed from 2013 in Chart 5.2.1b. For Aruba and St Maarten, the first years in the series are missing. For these islands, the graph therefore begins later, at the average index of the other islands for that year. The figure reveals that Bonaire's GDP has risen the most since 2013, and that the GDP of St Eustatius has contracted. The economies of the other islands have grown slightly; there is little divergence between them. Compared to the European Netherlands, growth since 2013 has been modest: in 2022, the GDP of the European Netherlands was nearly a quarter above that of 2013.

5.2.1b GDP, volume changes 2013-2022, indexed



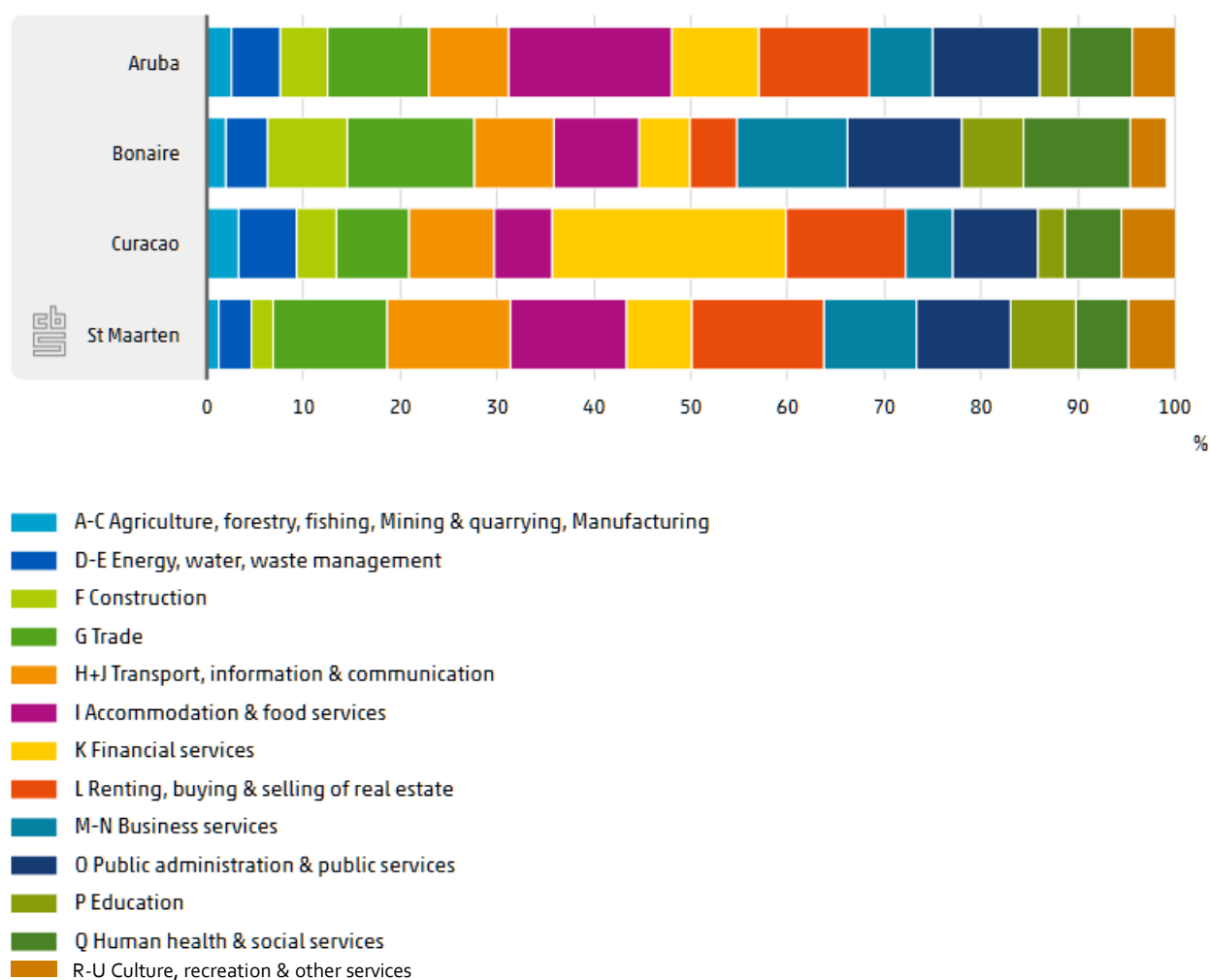
2013=100



5.2 Gross value added by industry

For the four largest islands, information is also available on gross value added by industry. This provides insight into the structures of the economies and whether, for example, they are dependent on a limited number of industries. The figures are shown for 2021, the most recent year for which the figures are known for all four of the larger islands. This information is not available for St Eustatius and Saba because CBS is bound by rules on disclosure. This means it is not possible to publish the figures for certain industries on St Eustatius and Saba. However, the year chosen fell in the middle of the pandemic, and the figures may present a distorted picture as a result. Figures are not available for the period immediately after the constitutional reform.

5.3.1 Net value added by economic sector, 2021



As Chart 5.3.1 shows, financial services are very important to the local economy on Curaçao. This sector accounts for almost a quarter of the island's total value added. It encompasses a number of banks, insurance companies and other financial institutions. The importance of tourism for all four of the islands is clearly demonstrated. For example, accommodation & food service is the most important sector on Aruba. Trade is also a relatively large sector on all the islands – this includes retail trade, such as shops and markets. Tourism also acts as a stimulus for business services, for example car rentals and travel agent services.

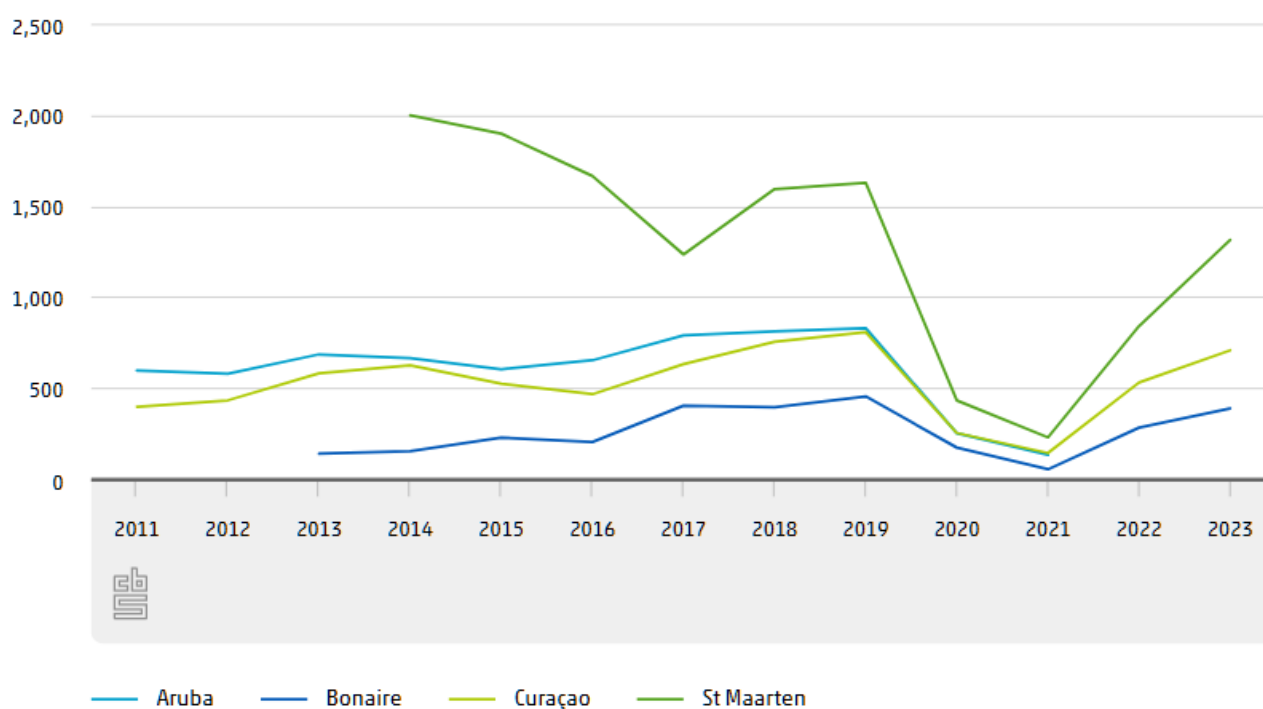
5.3 Tourism

As stated in the previous section, tourism is one of the most important sectors on all the islands in economic terms. In order to provide a picture of changes in the numbers of tourists on the islands and how the different islands compare, Chart 5.4.1 shows the number of cruise passengers for the period 2011 to 2023 (the major cruise companies do not call in St Eustatius or Saba). Cruise ships are an important source of income for many of the islands. What stands out in particular are the devastating effects of the coronavirus pandemic. After three bad years, passenger numbers finally returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2023.

5.4.1 Cruise ship passengers



x 1,000 passengers



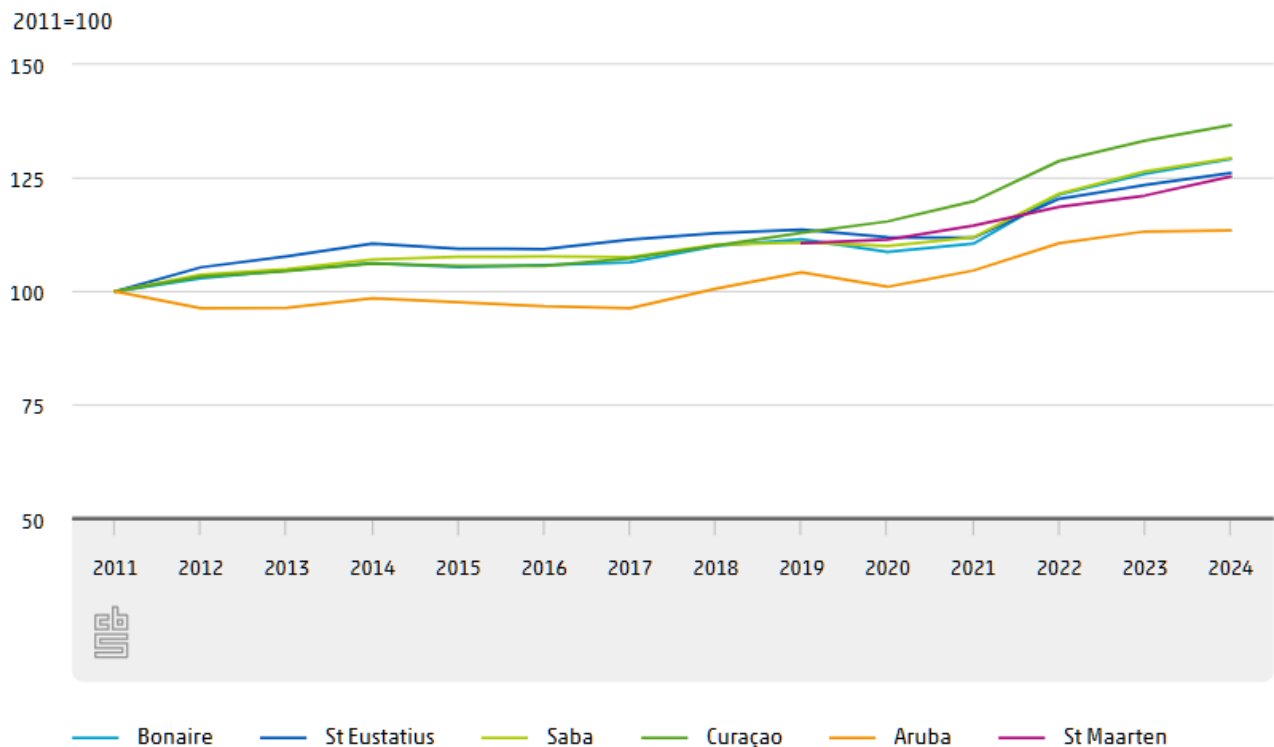
St Maarten receives by far the most cruise passengers. As such, the downturn caused by the pandemic was most severe for St Maarten. The number of tourists coming to Bonaire by cruise ship is generally much lower than for the CAS countries.

5.4 Inflation

This chapter concludes by taking a look at inflation. [Inflation](#) is the average increase in prices of consumer products. In order to be able to measure inflation properly, we first need to identify what residents of the islands spend their money on. We then look at the cost of the goods and services that residents buy. CBS obtains this information for Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba from written surveys, internet monitoring and external records, while some of the prices are documented by interviewers going from store to store. More information on how CBS measures inflation can be found in the Macroeconomic Context Monitor Baseline Measurement (CBS, 2024).

Because the methods used to chart inflation are not uniform, this can affect the comparability of the results. Inflation can also be influenced by differences in consumer spending patterns. This needs to be taken into account when interpreting the figures below. The periods for which the figures are available also differ substantially between the islands. For instance, the [figures](#) for Curaçao go back to 1970, while for St Maarten they are only available [from 2019](#). Chart 5.5.1 shows inflation indexed from the constitutional transition (2011). For St Maarten, an index has been taken for the first available year equal to the average of the other islands in that year.

5.5.1 Inflation, indexed



As Chart 5.1.1 shows, prices have risen by the most on Curaçao. Prices were 36.6% higher there in 2024 than in they had been in 2011. This is still slightly lower than the European Netherlands, where prices rose by 39%. Aruba saw the smallest increase in prices, at 13.4%. For most of the islands, inflation fluctuates around 2% annually, with 2022 as an obvious outlier. On all the islands in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, inflation was much higher in that year, ranging from 3.6% on St Maarten to 10% on Bonaire. Increased inflation was a global phenomenon. The most frequently cited causes of this global spike in inflation are the post-pandemic economic recovery and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The inflation figures are also relatively high for the years immediately following the constitutional transition in 2010. Research has been conducted into the possible causes of these price rises in the Caribbean Netherlands (Ecorys and Curconsult, 2017). After the reform, changes were implemented to various systems (tax, customs, care, social security) in a relatively short time-frame. These changes brought an element of uncertainty. This, in combination with the switch from the Antillean guilder to the US dollar, resulted in an upward price effect. There were also macro-economic causes for the relatively sharp price rises in this period, such as high oil and food prices and fluctuating exchange rates. Moreover, there was unrest in Venezuela, an important supplier.

6. Conclusion

The total population of the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands has grown by a little less than 10% since the constitutional reform, to 340 thousand inhabitants in 2025. This rise is largely due to an increase in the population of Bonaire, which has grown by nearly 70% (11 thousand residents) since 2011. The increase in the population of Bonaire is largely attributable to the fact that more people have moved to the island than have left.

The average age of the population is higher than it was fifteen years ago. All of the islands are home to more people aged 65 and over than in 2011 or a comparable year. The rise in the number of older people has been most pronounced on Curaçao; the number of those aged 65 and over there increased from 13.8% in 2011 to 25.3% in 2025.

Many island residents do not originate from the islands themselves: one-third of the inhabitants of Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba in 2024 were actually born within the BES region. For Bonaire and Saba, the proportion of residents born in the Caribbean Netherlands declined by 10 and 8 percentage points, respectively. More people with origins in the Netherlands or Central and South America have moved to those islands. For Aruba (62%) and St Maarten (41.6%), the share of residents born within the CAS area is much higher.

On all six islands, the majority of the population are in paid employment. However, labour force participation is consistently lower in the CAS countries than on the BES islands, and unemployment is higher. Nevertheless, unemployment has fallen on all the islands in recent years. A familiar problem on the islands is that young people from the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands leave to study elsewhere, for example in the European Netherlands, and do not return to the islands after completing their study programmes. The result of the departure of these young people is that the average educational level of residents of the six islands is relatively low. The permanent departure of those with higher vocational (HBO) and university educations can have an impact on the local labour market and on the economies of the islands.

GDP per capita is clearly highest on St Eustatius and lowest on Curaçao and St Maarten, while that of the other three islands is comparable. The economy of St Eustatius has displayed the slowest growth since 2013, while Bonaire's economy has grown the fastest. Since 2011, prices have risen fastest on Curaçao and slowest on Aruba.

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