

Violence and property crime

An in-depth study based on the WODC Criminal Justice Monitor

This report offers an impression of violent property crime. Within the larger classification of violent offences, violent property crime is the second largest category, after assault. Most of the literature on violent property crime focuses on one specific form, i.e. robbery. Violent property crime is defined in the Penal Code as a (attempted) property offence that is preceded, accompanied or followed by (threat of) violence. Robbery is, therefore, not the only incident that fits this definition. An incident of shoplifting, where the offender is apprehended and escapes using violence for instance – very different from a robbery in both form and use of violence – also meets the criteria. Especially in a time in which violence is of great concern to many, these differences are important. If we do not know how violent a violent crime is, we do not know anything about a possible growth in violence either. The first goal of the present study is to illustrate the diversity in violent property offences. In addition, special attention is being paid to the role of violence in each of the various forms of violent property crime. Central questions are: When does the violence occur?, and: What purpose does the violence serve?

To answer the research questions, data were used from the Criminal Justice Monitor (*Strafrechtmonitor*; SRM) that was developed by the WODC. The SRM is a registration system based on criminal files that are collected periodically. Unique feature of the SRM is the presence of qualitative descriptions of cases, in addition to the quantitative data that are also present in other existing monitors. The qualitative descriptions contain information that is difficult to encode or complimentary to the quantitative data. Because of this extra information, it is possible to reconstruct the actual sequence of events in any particular case, which is necessary to determine at which moment violence occurs. On the one hand, the information from the SRM has been processed several times: first by police and other officials who have created the files and secondly by the research assistants who encoded the files. On the other hand, there is a reasonable amount of certainty that the version of events as registered in the SRM is what really happened. In other words, the version this report is based on is a less direct one than can be obtained from for instance interviews with offenders, but it is also a less coloured one.

The present report is based on the first round of data collection and contains cases that were handled by the courts in 1993. This first round yielded 79 instances of

violent property crime. These have at first been sorted into six common categories: shoplifting followed by violence, purse-snatching, personal/non-commercial robbery, violent property crime in a private home, violent property crime in a place of business, and robbery of personnel. A detailed description of each of the categories is presented, illustrated with examples from the qualitative data of the SRM. These descriptions underline the great diversity in factual events that fall under the label violent property crime.

Next, the place and function of violence is analysed for each category. Analysis consisted of division of each incident into nine scenes that are in a chronological and – theoretically, at least – causal order. This allows us to establish a scenario for each incident that highlights the moment at which violence occurs. In addition, other aspects of violence are discussed: actual use of violence vs. threats, seriousness of violence and victim injuries, use of weapons and the role of the interaction between offender and victim in the use of violence. Especially from the moment violence occurs, information about the function of violence can be deduced. For instance, if violence occurred after the property offence, one can conclude that the violence did not serve to make the property offence possible. The analysis shows that both moment of use of violence and function of violence differed considerably in the various categories.

Finally, based on those two variables, the incidents are categorised again according to two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the initiation of the violence. Results show that in a number of cases of violent property crime (particularly the incidents of shoplifting resulting in violence), the violence occurs after apprehensions of the offender and appears to be a product of the interaction between offender and victim: the violence can be labelled ‘reactive’ as opposed to the ‘proactive’ violence that is generally associated with robberies. The second dimension concerns the degree in which the violence was related to the theft. The relevance of this dimension was indicated by a small group of incidents that can be characterised as violent crime with a property component. In these cases, the core of the event was (sexual) assault; the theft was subsidiary and in all likelihood not part of the offender’s original plan. The fact that these cases were prosecuted as violent property crime is remarkable, since they do not fit the definition from the Penal Code, the violence did not serve the property offence.

It is concluded that in two thirds of the cases analysed the (threatened) violence was proactive and directly related to the theft. This can be called ‘pure’ violent property crime and consists of those offences that are generally studied: robbery and purse-snatching. A third of the cases is consequently made up of various other types of incidents. A distinctive group of property offences followed by violence can be identified (shoplifting and burglaries where the burglar is apprehended), where the property component was more important than the violent component. Violence in

these cases can be called reactive and related to the theft in the sense that is was intended to escape the crime scene with the stolen goods. In addition, there was the small group of incidents already mentioned, where the importance of the property and violent component were reversed: these offenders did not start out committing a property offence, but rather a violent crime, which renders the violence proactive and not related to the theft. Finally, there was a group of incidents that represents failed attempts. In all these cases, the property crime was unsuccessful and violence ensued the moment the failure became clear: reactive violence that is not related to the theft therefore.

The model of violence in violent property crime that is proposed is tentative and should primarily be regarded as a suggestion for further research. In particular the role the victim plays or can play in the occurrence of violence seems to warrant further investigation. In the final section of the report, some proposals for research are mentioned that make use of the periodical nature of the SRM. When more rounds of data collection have been done and more measurements become available, the number of possibilities for further research will grow accordingly.

