

Summary

Recidivism following release from prison

A statistical overview of criminal recidivism of former inmates in the Netherlands

This study explores recidivism following custodial sentences imposed in the Netherlands. Despite a considerable increase in the number of places available, the Dutch prison system is finding it difficult to meet the growing demand for prison cells. Policy programmes aim at augmenting the number of community sanctions in order to reduce the need for cells. By means of the programme *Reducing Recidivism* the Ministry of Justice is working out conditions to implement 'effective interventions', interventions that help prevent former inmates from reoffending. This report deals with criminal recidivism amongst former inmates. The report maps out the outflow results for all penal institutions, divided as to type of institution and duration of stay. It also focuses on the 'incapacitation effect', the reduction of crime due to the detention of offenders. In order to provide some background to the research results, a number of these results have been compared with the results of similar measurements amongst adult offenders who were imposed criminal sanctions in 1997, not necessarily imprisonment (see Wartna, Tollenaar and Blom, 2005).

Study group

The study group comprised over 53,000 people aged 18 or older who were discharged from a penal institution at least once over the 1996-1999 period. The study investigates which part of this group has once again been arrested or reconvicted after completing detention. *Table a* sets out the research numbers as well as some background characteristics of the former prisoners involved.

Table a Background characteristics of inmates who left detention between 1996 and 1999

	number	% male	average age	% born in the NL	% frequent offender*	median duration of detention in days
1996	16.476	95.58	32.81	56.26	61.41	157.74
1997	17.749	95.84	32.62	56.21	61.34	160.43
1998	18.117	95.10	32.69	55.08	61.23	155.40
1999	17.260	92.38	32.55	54.30	60.56	143.45
Total	69.602	94.73	32.67	55.45	61.13	154.25

* Based on the number of previous convictions

There are no substantial differences in the four outflow cohorts. The group that left an institution in 1999 stands out the most considering the scores in the entire research group. The overall group is 95 percent male. More than half of all former inmates are born in the Netherlands. The former inmates clearly do not represent an average offender group. The number of 'frequent offenders' in the study groups is six times higher than average. In the overall offender population the percentage of people who have been convicted three times or more in a five years period preceding the current detention is 9.4 percent, compared with more than 61 percent in the group of former inmates (see *Table a*). In interpreting the results, the inmates' different backgrounds must be taken into account. If the rates of recidivism for a particular detention modality are lower than average, this does not necessarily mean that this modality is more effective. The difference in recidivism may also be explained by other factors.

Method

The study is part of the *WODC Recidivism Monitor*, an ongoing project in which standardised measurements are being carried out amongst a wide range of offender groups. The measurements are based on data from the Justice Documentation research and policy database (OBJD). The OBJD is an anonymous version of the justice documentation system (JDS) and contains information about crimes prosecuted by the Public Prosecutors Office. The Recidivism Monitor applies fixed criteria to assess the rate of recidivism (table b).

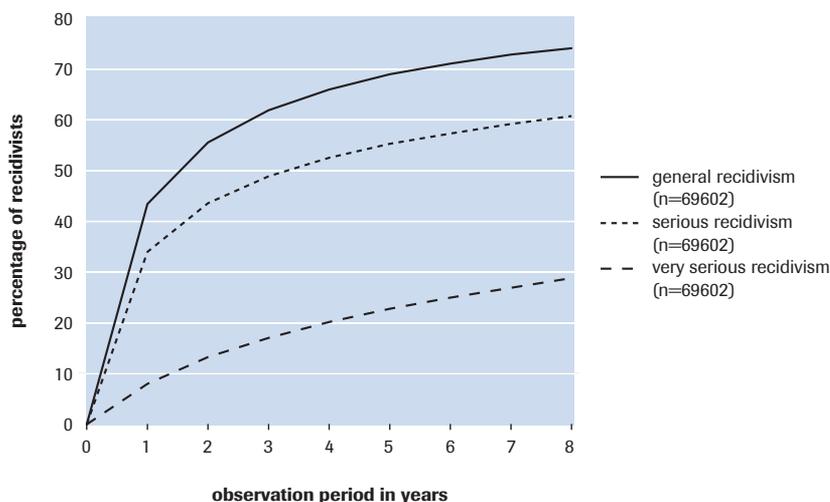
Table b Recidivism criteria within the WODC Recidivism Monitor

Criterion	Description
General recidivism	New criminal cases, regardless of the nature and seriousness of the crimes committed, with the exception of criminal cases that result in acquittal, dismissal by reason of likelihood of non-conviction, or another technical verdict or disposal
Serious recidivism	Reconviction* following a crime punishable by 4 years or more
Very serious recidivism	Reconviction* following a crime punishable by 8 years or more
Special recidivism	Reconviction* following a crime similar to the initial crime

* Including discretionary dismissals and settlements by the Public Prosecutors Office.

With these criteria, the study describes the recidivism rates for the four outflow cohorts. The period of time in which the former inmates could be followed ranged from a minimum of 5 years up to a maximum of 8 years. Since the data available were limited, the report offers no explanation as to the occurrence or absence of recidivism. It does not deal with the

Figure a Prevalence of general, serious and very serious recidivism amongst former inmates who left detention in the period 1996-1999



backgrounds or causes of reoffending but merely sets out the figures, dealing with the following aspects:

- the *prevalence* of recidivism; which part of the (sub)group has reoffended?
- the *speed* with which the person reoffended; when did he or she reoffend?
- the *frequency* of recidivism; how many times was the reoffender arrested or reconvicted following the initial case?
- The *nature* and *seriousness* of the recidivism crimes; which type of crime was committed and how was the new criminal case dealt with?
- the *magnitude* of the recidivism; what are the overall recidivism rates in the (sub)group?

Prevalence of recidivism amongst former inmates

Figure a sets out an overview of the prevalence of general, serious and very serious recidivism amongst former inmates who left an institution in the period 1996-1999. Since the differences between the cohorts appear to be minimal, only the recidivism percentages for the overall study group are given.

Recidivism rates amongst former inmates are high. Four years after dismissal from the penal institution some 66 percent has been reconvicted for a new crime, compared with 37 percent for the overall population of adult offenders. After eight years, three quarters of all former inmates have been reconvicted, mostly for committing a medium

Figure b1 Magnitude of recidivism amongst adult former inmates who left the institution in the period 1996-1999

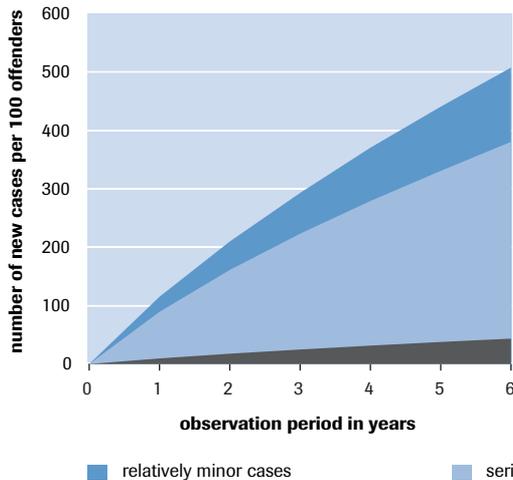
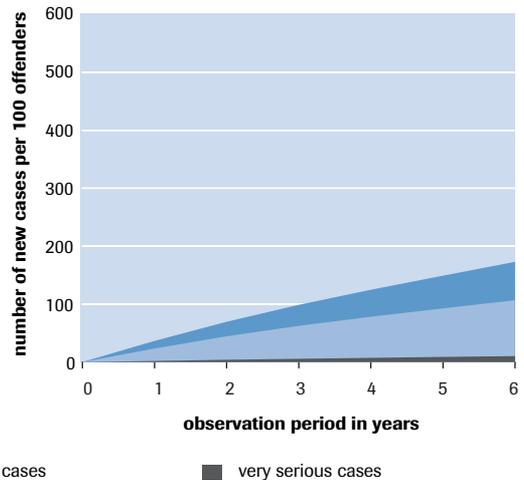


Figure b2 Magnitude of recidivism amongst adult offenders whose criminal case was settled in 1997



to serious crime, offences punishable by four to eight years. Very serious recidivism, following offences punishable by eight years or more, is less common, although the risk of this form of recidivism is almost four times as high as in the overall offender population.

Other aspects of recidivism

Within four years after leaving prison reoffending inmates were reconvicted 5.6 times on average, compared with 3.4 reconvictions in the overall adult offender population. Again, the differences between the four cohorts are small. Almost 70 percent of all the former inmate recidivism cases involved non-violent property offences, and 20 percent involved violent offences. 68 percent of all recidivism cases was settled with a new unconditional custodial sentences, compared with some 45 percent in the overall population of adult offenders. Percentages of unconditional custodial sentences were a little higher in the last two cohorts. The percentage of the other disposals (probation, community service orders, fines and discretionary dismissals) seems to have fallen slightly.

Combining the results as regards prevalence and frequency of the various forms of recidivism, we get a clear picture of the overall magnitude of recidivism amongst former inmates. *Figure b1* sets out the figures of recidivism cases that followed after the stay in the penal institution for the overall group of former inmates. *Figure b2* does the same, but for the overall group of adult offenders. The figures have been distributed as to seriousness of the offence committed, distinguishing between relatively

minor, serious and very serious offences.²⁷ In order to be able to make a sound comparison, the numbers are expressed per group of one hundred offenders.

The magnitude of recidivism amongst former inmates is much greater than amongst offenders in general. In the period up to six years after leaving the institution, each group of 100 former inmates accumulated 507 reconvictions, 380 of which were crimes punishable by four years or more and 43 punishable by eight years or more. For the entire offender population these numbers were 172, 106 and 10 respectively. Based on these results we may conclude that, calculated over a six-year period, the magnitude of recidivism amongst former inmates is estimated to be almost three times as high as amongst offenders in general. Serious recidivism rates are 3.6 higher than average and very serious recidivism rates 4.2 times higher.

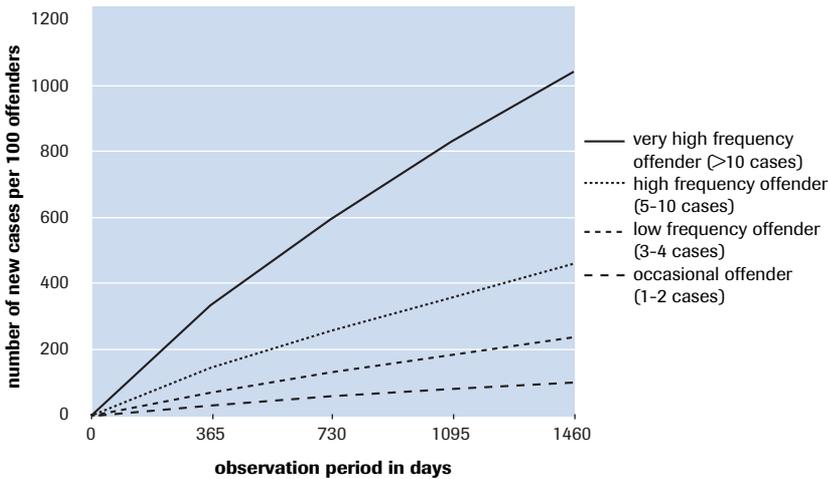
Factors related to the prevalence of recidivism

The risk of recidivism amongst former inmates is closely related to a number of factors. There are major differences in the level of recidivism within the group of former inmates. Main indicators are gender and country of birth, but the key indicator is the number of previous convictions. The more pre-detention convictions, the more likely the former inmate will reoffend after his stay in the penal institution. Male offenders reoffend more often than females. Adult former inmates born on the Netherlands Antilles or Aruba, or in Surinam reoffend more often than former inmates born in the Netherlands.

In addition to the role of these personal characteristics, some effects have been found for the duration of the detention and the type of prison. Longer detentions give lower recidivism rates, while recidivism rates amongst inmates who completed their detention in a (semi)open institution or an institution for daytime detention was lower than for inmates from other institutions. It is not clear how these results should be explained. Possibly, the term of detention determines its success while the regimes in said institutions contribute to a reduction of the actual recidivism rates. But it can also be explained by selection effects (not measured) or any other factors that may affect differences in recidivism rates. In order to establish the efficiency of a particular detention regime, research is required to compare recidivism rates of individuals with the recidivism rates of a group of former inmates that is comparable in all relevant aspects. Since this was not the case in this study, it is impossible to give firm statements based on these results.

27 This distinction is based on the maximum sentence set for the offences; see table b.

Figure c Number of recidivism cases amongst adult former inmates who left the institution between 1996-1999; set out as to number of previous convictions in a five year period preceding the prison term



Incapacitation: a preliminary effort to estimate the number of penal cases prevented by imprisonment

A study into the effectiveness of criminal interventions is usually aimed at recidivism rates that occur after the sanction has been implemented. This study also focuses on the special preventative effect *during* the execution of the punishment. During detention the offender is more or less 'incapacitated', he is (virtually) unable to commit offences. It goes without saying that the size of the incapacitation effect depends on the term of the penalties imposed. An initial and very rough estimate shows that by handing out the prison sentences executed in the period 1996-1999 the Ministry of Justice in the Netherlands has prevented a total number of 27,000 criminal cases. The effect would have been greater had the punishments been distributed differently across the various offenders. *Figure c* sets out four types of offenders and their number of recidivism cases in the period following the detention per group of 100 offenders. Persons who have been previously reconvicted more than ten times (the so-called 'very high-frequency frequent offenders') show the highest recidivism rates following detention. Depending on differences in data, it would certainly be useful to explore in more detail what number of prevented cases could be gained if the most active offenders were to be imprisoned for longer than usual. Such studies are relevant, all the more so since in addition to the institutions for the criminal detention of addicts (SOV) special institutions for 'frequent offenders' (ISD) recently have become operational in the Netherlands.

In conclusion

The size of the incapacitation effect may be estimated since OBJD has documentation available for all prisoners who left a Dutch institution in the study period. Each measurement carried out for the WODC Recidivism Monitor is based on data from the OBJD, a database developed specially for this type of research. In addition to this study into former inmates, reports have also been published about juvenile and adult offenders, 'frequent offenders', former pupils of correctional institutions for juveniles and former offenders under an entrustment order. The measurements amongst these offender groups will be carried out periodically, to keep the Justice department informed of the outflow results for all key criminal interventions.