Summary

Frequent offenders: specialists or not?

A study into patterns in the nature of consecutive offences committed by high-frequent offenders in their criminal career

In policy as well as in science, the approach to high-frequent offenders tends to focus on the frequency with which these perpetrators commit crime. This is hardly surprising, since frequent offenders – also known as habitual offenders, revolving-door criminals or high-chronic offenders – are especially known for committing many and frequent offences. This mainly involves non-violent property crimes and public order offences, although violent offences are not uncommon. Frequent offenders pose a significant nuisance to society. Nevertheless, policy and science have limited attention for the nature of the criminal behaviour of frequent offenders, over the course of their criminal career.

In this study we investigate whether high-frequent offenders specialise in certain types of crime. We also examine to what extent they switch between types of crime, and whether any crime-switching patterns can be discerned in their career. We furthermore aim to determine whether, within the overall population of frequent offenders, it is possible to distinguish sub-groups on the basis of similar patterns. We specifically focus on the *high-frequent adult offender.*

The question concerning specialisation or versatility among frequent offenders is relevant for both police investigation work and for the (policy) approach to this group, for several reasons. First, such insight can improve policies targeting this group by applying selective interventions and treatments. If frequent offenders show a versatile crime pattern, then one may expect the cause for one type of offence to be comparable to the cause for another type of offence. In that case, general interventions would seem an obvious approach, regardless of the crime committed. On the other hand, if specialisation does occur, then there may well be differences in the causes between the different groups of specialists. This would then imply targeted interventions. Second, insight into the extent of specialisation can help in the investigation and in assessing the risk of recidivism. Predictable patterns in the nature of the offences committed in the past might increase the chance of a repeat of similar patterns in the future.

The main research question of the study is: *To what extent do high-frequent offenders, over the course of their criminal career, specialise in types of crime; can any patterns be discerned in this; and can sub-types of frequent offenders be identified with comparable criminal career patterns?*

To answer this question, we first conducted a literature study, followed by an empirical study using data from the 2008 cohort of extremely active frequent

offenders. The information was obtained from the Frequent Offenders Monitor.

International studies have yet to concur on the extent to which highly frequent offenders specialise over the course of their criminal career. There appears to be some degree of specialisation within the major domains of violent or property crime, but within these domains the offenders alternate between various types of crime. Differences in degree of specialisation have been found between offender groups (violence, high- or low-frequency offenders) and age groups. Some studies point out that specialisation can be discerned, depending on the length of period considered within a criminal career: offenders may start to switch between different offences as their criminal career progresses. To what extent patterns can be recognised in the manner of switching between different types of crime is not known. An important reason for the differences among empirical studies is the type of research method used. Differences in operationalization, unity of analysis and analysis technique appear to pose an important obstacle to reaching unequivocal conclusions. The literature therefore recommends using different techniques side by side to analyse specialisation.

Method

For this study, the 2008 cohort of high-frequent adult offenders (HFO's) was used. For this group, the HKS data (police recognition system), detention data, rehabilitation data, RISc (recidivism risk) and criminal record data were linked. The unit of analysis is the offence as recorded on the court summons. These offences were sorted chronologically per individual, resulting in a sequence of offences per person over their known criminal career. These crime sequences were analysed using classic analysis methods from criminological studies on offence specialisation. The sequences were additionally analysed using sequence analysis, which is an explorative data-analysis method first used in genetics. To discover sub-groups, the crime sequences were divided into similar groups by means of cluster analyses. This clustering was based on similarities between the crime sequences. Subsequently, the background characteristics of the found clusters were compared.

Results

First we determined for the total HFO population to what extent specialisation occurs; and what patterns can be discovered in the sequence of crimes committed in their criminal career. The analyses of the extent of specialisa-

tion/versatility and of the sequences in criminal careers in the total 2008 HFO population revealed the following:
– At the aggregate level, a very limited degree of specialisation occurs (as measured by the Forward Specialization Coefficient, FSC). If the HFO's specialise, then this largely involves non-violent property crimes. Some measure of specialisation also occurs in other types of crime, most importantly in traffic crimes and in public order and vandalism crimes.
– Over the course of their personal crime career, the majority of the HFO population show versatility in the types of crime for which they have been prosecuted (as measured by the diversity coefficient). We do see a lot of variation however, which means that there is some degree of specialisation among a part of the HFO population.
– The sequences show that HFO's, over the course of their criminal career, often switch between the types of crime for which they are prosecuted. However, we also see longer sub-sequences of similar offences, particularly non-violent property crimes. These crimes are often committed in consecutive series. This pattern also occurs with regard to traffic and violent crimes.
– A cross-section from the criminal career sequences shows that the most frequently occurring type of crime over the course of a whole career is non-violent property crime. The longer the sequences, the greater this proportion becomes.
– The average criminal career sequence length comprises 53 offences. HFO's commit an average of 5 different types of crimes, over the course of their recorded career. If we make sequences of different offenders comparable (through normalisation), then it emerges that HFO's switch between types of crime on 4 out of 10 occasions, on average. In series of consecutive crimes by frequent offenders, 3.2 similar crimes are committed consecutively, on average.
– Finally, the sequence analysis suggests that, among the total 2008 cohort of HFO's, there are clusters of offenders with comparable sequences.

Cluster analyses indeed revealed that, within the recorded criminal career and based on the nature of their criminal sequences, five clusters of HFO's could be distinguished within the total group of 2008. These five clusters were also clearly distinctive in terms of other criminal career characteristics, their backgrounds (also in terms of their addiction and/or mental problems), and in respect of their education and job market problems. The analyses indicate that, within the population of frequent offenders, there is a large amount of variation in the extent of specialisation in the crimes committed over the course of their career, and in the crime patterns displayed. Again, there are hardly any HFO's who were completely specialised in their criminal career, but certain patterns in the consecutive types of crimes can be distinguished across a career. We found the following five clusters:

– *The ultimate frequent traffic offenders (6.9%)*: besides for non-violent property crime, over the course of their career these HFO's frequently come into contact with the law for frequent traffic offences. The majority of these offenders show an average versatility in their crime pattern. The proportion of traffic offences is high, and this only increases as the offender's career progresses, while the proportion of non-violent property crimes decreases. The ultimate frequent traffic offenders appear to switch frequently especially at the start of their career. As their career progresses, they appear to be prosecuted more often for consecutive series of traffic offences. Compared to the offenders in the other four clusters, these HFO's start their career relatively late, and they form an average group in respect of other criminal career characteristics (average duration, average number of different crimes, and an average level of crime switching). Also regarding their backgrounds, this group deviates from the other groups of HFO's. This group consists mainly of male offenders from small municipalities (less than 5,000 inhabitants). Around one-third hold a job (permanently or occasionally). In other areas they function relatively well, with the exception of alcohol use, which is assessed as problematic.

– *The stereotypical/continuing frequent property offenders (20%)*: this subgroup fits the commonly held picture of a HFO. They mainly commit property crime without violence. Nevertheless, they regularly alternate their property crimes with another type of crime, but not one specific type. This group has a relatively young starting age with an extremely long criminal career involving many different types of crime. This group does display consecutive series of similar crimes, almost as if they temporarily get stuck in one type of crime. According to rehabilitation data, this group poses the greatest problem in the areas of addiction, physical health and housing. This group also contains the highest percentage of unemployed/ occupationally disabled. They originate relatively often from large and midsize cities.

– *The rapidly diversifying frequent offenders (24.3%)*: these offenders commit a lot of non-violent property crime, but also a lot of vandalism and public order offences, as well as violent offences. The longer their career, the larger the proportion of public order offences and violence, and the smaller the number of non-violent property offences. Their career is the shortest in comparison to the other clusters, but they do display a rapid diversification from specialisation to versatility. As regards background, the offenders in this cluster relatively often have financial problems, but relatively little addiction issues. They rank as average with respect to the other problem areas. This cluster furthermore contains the lowest proportion of native Dutch citizens.

– *The slowly diversifying frequent offenders (23.3%)*: regarding the distribution of crimes across their career, this cluster of HFO's resembles the previous two clusters. However, their share of non-violent property crime is

slightly higher. A further difference is that the share of non-violent property crime and violent offences is located toward the end of the sequence. The problems affecting this group of offenders take an intermediate position compared to those affecting the previous two groups.

– *The permanently aggressive frequent offenders (25.5%)*: compared to the other clusters, the offenders in this cluster appear to devote more of their career to aggression-related crimes, specifically violent offences and public order and vandalism offences. These two types of crimes also appear to occur one after the other, chronologically. This cluster has the highest percentage of people of other non-Western origin and other non-Western born. Relationship and mental problems are most prevalent in this group, and of all the clusters they most often live in small municipalities of 10,000 to 25,000 inhabitants.

Conclusion

Neither theory nor empirical research offers clear indications on the extent of specialisation or versatility displayed by offenders in the types of crime they commit over the course of their career. This research has shown that, by considering the patterns of consecutive offences in the criminal-career of high frequent offenders, several sub-groups can be distinguished. Some HFO's specialise more than others do. Also, some show a development in the extent of their specialisation over the course of their career, from mainly versatile to more specialised, or vice versa.

In the total population of high-frequent adult offenders, a number of profiles were found that deviate from the 'classic' image of the high-frequent offender who more or less only commits non-violent property crime. We also found HFO's who increasingly turned to traffic crimes, though not exclusively. We furthermore found HFO's with a strong focus on aggression-related crimes, such as violent crimes and public order and vandalism crimes. Yet also within the group of stereotypical frequent offenders who primarily engage in property crime, we found that sub-groups exist. Some HFO's appear to develop a versatile crime pattern early on in their career, while others develop into versatile offenders only gradually. The groups also differed with regard to background characteristics.

In sum, the population of HFO's turns out to be less homogeneous in terms of specialisation or versatility than might be assumed on the basis of previous findings and on the prevailing image of frequent offenders. These results may potentially serve as a basis to modify the approach to frequent offenders, both in criminal investigation work and in the legal interventions applied to them, in order to focus more on the sub-groups that do not fit the stereotypical image.