Summary

Background characteristics and recidivism among offenders of high impact crimes convicted between 2002 and 2015

For some years now, the term 'high impact crimes' (abbreviated HIC) has been used in the Netherlands to indicate offences that have a major impact on the victim, their social environment and the sense of security in society. The classic HIC offences include domestic burglary, street robbery and non-street robbery (i.e., robbery inside a building such as a bank, shop or house). Recently, the government has made great efforts to combat the HIC problem, through various policy and safety programs and by setting up a Robbery Task Force.

In the current study, we examined the background characteristics and recidivism of domestic burglars, street robbers and non-street robbers convicted between 2002 and 2015. This study is part of a five-year research program into recidivism among HIC offenders, which started mid 2016. The current study is a follow-up of the first recidivism study among all convicted HIC offenders in the Netherlands between 2002 and 2013 and a feasibility study into regional recidivism rates among convicted HIC-offenders. The following research questions were answered:

1. What are the background characteristics of convicted HIC offenders and how do the characteristics of this group compare to the characteristics of the total group of convicted offenders?

2. What is the recidivism rate among convicted HIC offenders: What percentage of the HIC offenders came back into contact with the criminal justice system within two years of their HIC criminal case (prevalence of recidivism)? How does the prevalence of recidivism for this group compare to the prevalence of recidivism for the total group of convicted offenders?

3. How do recidivism rates among convicted HIC offenders develop over time, taking into account shifts in the background characteristics of offenders over time?

4. What are the recidivism rates per court district among convicted HIC offenders, taking into account differences in the background characteristics of offenders between court districts?

Method

The research was carried out according to the WODC recidivism monitor procedures, using data from the Research and Policy Database for Judicial Information (OBJD). The OBJD is a pseudonymous version of the Justice Documentation System (JDS), the Dutch legal registration system for criminal cases. The use of the OBJD implies that only crime that comes to the Public Prosecution Service’s attention is included in this research. Therefore, offences and offenders that are not detected by the police and are not prosecuted by the Public Prosecution Service are not taken into consideration.
The research group examined in the current study includes offenders of domestic burglary, street robbery and non-street robbery who were prosecuted by the Public Prosecution Service between 2002 and 2015 and where a HIC offence was proven. More specifically, these are perpetrators for whom the HIC offence has irrevocably ended in a court order or has been settled by the Public Prosecution Service (including discretionary dismissals, but excluding acquittals, technical dismissals and other technical decisions). In this report the research group is referred to as 'convicted offenders'.

To put the background characteristics and recidivism percentages of the convicted HIC offenders in perspective, these data are compared to the characteristics and recidivism rates of a reference group, namely all convicted offenders in the Netherlands. This reference group includes all offenders of a criminal offence in which the criminal case was terminated irrevocably in a court order or was settled by the Public Prosecution Service. It is important to note that a direct comparison between the HIC offenders and the reference group is not possible. The purpose of the data of the reference group is solely to put the data of the HIC offenders in perspective.

This study was carried out following the WODC recidivism monitor procedures. According to the recidivism monitor, recidivism is defined as a new criminal case. A criminal case refers to a case that has irrevocably ended in a court order or has been settled by the Public Prosecution Service, as well as cases that have not yet been (irrevocably) ended or settled. This study examined the two-year recidivism prevalence. This is the percentage of people from the research group that committed a new offence within two years that led to a new criminal case. In this study three forms of recidivism are examined: general recidivism, HIC recidivism, and special recidivism. General recidivism refers to when a person has a new criminal case for any new offence. HIC recidivism refers to when a person has a new criminal case for a HIC offence. In this study, special recidivism refers to when a person has a new criminal case for the same kind of offence as the original offence, that is domestic burglary, street robbery or non-street robbery. Recidivism rates have been calculated using survival analysis. This is adjusted for incapacitation time, in other words, for the time that offenders were in detention and reoffending was not possible.

To see how the two-year general recidivism prevalence among the HIC offenders developed in the past ten years (between 2006 and 2015), besides actual recidivism rates, adjusted recidivism rates have been calculated taking into account shifts in the background characteristics of offenders over time. The reason for this correction is that fluctuations in the level of recidivism may be the result of shifts in the composition of research groups over time. Indeed, the risk profile of offenders can also change as their background characteristics change. Actual recidivism percentages are adjusted using a statistical prediction model. For all three HIC offender groups we were able to develop prediction models, however, for non-street robbers we were only able to develop a prediction model for the past five years rather than ten years.

To get an indication of the two-year general recidivism level within the different court districts, actual recidivism rates were compared with expected recidivism rates taking into account differences in the background characteristics of offenders between court districts. This is important because differences in the level of recidivism between court districts can be the result of differences in the background
characteristics of offenders between court districts. To calculate the expected recidivism rates a statistical prediction model was used. Per court district, we compared the actual and expected recidivism rate and examined whether or not these differences were statistically significant (p value < 0.05) and relevant (effect size > 0.1).

**Key findings**

The most important findings of the study are described below.

**Total annual convictions**
- All three HIC offender groups show a decrease in the number of convicted offenders between 2002 and 2015. The number of convicted domestic burglars and non-street robbers fluctuated over time, but over the entire period decreased from 2,542 to 1,842 domestic burglars and from 832 to 497 non-street robbers. The number of convicted street robbers more than halved between 2002 and 2015, from 2,100 to 807 street robbers.

**Background characteristics**
- Street robbers are relatively young when they commit the offense. At the time of their criminal case, 41% of the convicted street robbers in 2015 were minors, compared to 19% of the convicted non-street robbers, 13% of the convicted domestic burglars and 6% of convicted offenders in general. The percentage of convicted street robbers who are minors has, however, decreased in the past years, from 51% in 2011 to 41% in 2015.
- Convicted HIC offenders came into contact with the law for the first time at a young age. This applies in particular to street robbers: 79% of the street robbers convicted in 2015 had their first criminal case under the age of 18. However, of the convicted non-street robbers and domestic burglars 69% and 63% also had their first criminal case as a minor. In contrast, of the total group of offenders convicted in 2015, only 31% had their first criminal case as a minor.
- The criminal history data show that most HIC offenders have had previous contact with the law. In 2015, respectively 83%, 81% and 73% of the convicted domestic burglars, street robbers and non-street robbers had one or more previous criminal cases. For all convicted offenders this is 63%.
- The criminal history data also show that HIC offenders have come into contact with the law for a range of different offences. All three offender groups have committed other offences as well as HIC offences other than their initial HIC offence often. Hence, we do not see high levels of specialization. Of the three groups, domestic burglars tend to specialize the most (34% has one or more previous criminal cases for domestic burglary).
- Convicted domestic burglars have the most extensive criminal record. In 2015, the average number of previous criminal cases for domestic burglars was eleven, while the convicted non-street robbers, convicted street robbers and the total group of convicted offenders had on average respectively eight, six and five earlier criminal cases. For all three HIC offender groups, the average number of previous criminal cases decreased between 2002 and 2015.
- Convicted domestic burglars and street robbers in 2015 were mostly punished with a short prison sentence of a maximum of six months (both 36%) or with community service (30% and 24%), while the majority of non-street robbers were convicted to a long prison sentence of at least six months (58%).
The results show that most HIC criminal cases are settled in the Randstad area. In 2015, almost half of all domestic burglary and non-street robbery cases and two thirds of all street robbery cases were settled in the arrondissements of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Midden-Nederland (within which Utrecht falls) and The Hague.

Recidivism rates
- The recidivism analysis shows that 56% of domestic burglars, 54% of street robbers and 43% of non-street robbers convicted in 2015 have had a new criminal case for any offence within two years of their HIC criminal case (general recidivism). These rates are high compared to a two-year recidivism rate of 28% for the total group of convicted offenders.
- Convicted HIC offenders often reoffend with other offenses than their initial HIC offence. This follows from the finding that the HIC recidivism rates (6% to 15%) and special recidivism rates (2% to 13%) are much lower than the general recidivism rates (43% to 56%). Non-street robbers appear to be the strongest generalists; domestic burglars specialize somewhat more.

Recidivism rates over time
- Looking at the development of recidivism, it appears that the two-year general recidivism, when adjusted for shifts in the background characteristics of the offenders over time, decreased or was stable among the three HIC offender groups. For domestic burglary and street robbery the recidivism development over the past ten years (between 2006 and 2015) was examined. The adjusted recidivism among domestic burglars decreased from 60% to 56% in this period. The adjusted recidivism among street robbers decreased from 57% in 2006 to 51% in 2014, and, subsequently, increased to 54% in 2015. For non-street robbery the recidivism development over the past five years (between 2011 and 2015) was examined. The adjusted recidivism among non-street robbers decreased from 43% in 2011 to 38% in 2013, and, subsequently, increased to 43% in 2015.
- The findings seem to indicate a trend break. Whereas the previous recidivism study among HIC offenders showed decreasing trends up until 2013, this has ended for cohort 2014 and 2015 among all three HIC offender groups. In particular, the development of recidivism among non-street robbers is striking. Between 2004 and 2013 the strongest decrease was among non-street robbers (a relative decrease of 20%), while between 2013 and 2015 the recidivism among this group of offenders shows the strongest increase (a relative increase of 15%).

Expected recidivism per court district
- In several court districts the actual and expected recidivism rates among domestic burglars, street robbers and non-street robbers significantly differ. However, looking at the effect size, in only two instances is there a relevant difference. First, in court district ‘Overijssel’ the recidivism rate among street robbers is lower than expected based on background characteristics included in this study. The actual recidivism rate is 9.8 percentage points lower than the expected recidivism rate of 48.5 percent. The effect size is, however, small (0.141). Second, in court district ‘Noord-Nederland’ the recidivism rate among non-street robbers is also lower than expected. The actual recidivism rate is 7.1 percentage points lower than the expected recidivism rate of 41.1 percent. However, the effect size is again small (0.111).
Limitations

The current study has some limitations. A first limitation is that the present study uses data from the judicial documentation system. This means that only offences and offenders that are detected by the police and are prosecuted by the Public Prosecution Service are included in this study. This is particularly troublesome, as clear-up rates for all three HIC offences are relatively low, especially for domestic burglary. A second limitation is that a limited number of background characteristics of the convicted HIC-offenders were used to calculate the adjusted recidivism rate over time and the expected recidivism rate per court district. Whilst characteristics like gender, country of birth, age and criminal career were included, other characteristics, like substance abuse and psychological problems, which are also known to influence reoffending behavior, were not included. A third limitation is that the current study is descriptive in nature. As a result a conclusive explanation is lacking for the development of recidivism over time and for why the recidivism level in certain court districts is lower than expected. Several factors can influence recidivism rates, such as, offender background characteristics not included in this study, crime control policies and registration effects. Further research is needed to determine which factors are responsible for these findings. The current findings merely have a signaling function.

To conclude

The findings of the current study lead to three conclusions. First, the results show that HIC offenders are an active offender group who often start criminal behaviour at a young age. A significant portion of the HIC offenders is a minor at the time of their criminal case. This especially applies to street robbers. Prior research has shown that minor HIC offenders have the highest chance of becoming a frequent offender. It is therefore important to intervene early on in cases of under age HIC offenders. Second, the results seem to indicate a trend break in the development of the recidivism among HIC offenders. Up until 2013 the recidivism rate among HIC offenders decreased. However, in 2014 and 2015 this decrease stagnated or even reversed, resulting in an increase. Although the cause of this change is unknown and it is unclear how the recidivism trend will develop in the future, it seems important to continue the focus on HIC offenders and on efforts to combat the HIC problem. Finally, it is notable that the number of convicted HIC offenders since 2002 has dramatically declined, whilst the recidivism rate in the past decennium has not declined at nearly the same rate. It would be an interesting avenue for future research to investigate how these different trends can be explained.