Summary

Background characteristics and recidivism among offenders of high impact crimes convicted between 2002 and 2016

For some years now, the term 'high impact crimes' (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 2016. 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 two earlier recidivism studies among all convicted HIC offenders in the Netherlands in 2002-2013 and 2002-2015 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 recidivism rate among this group compare to the recidivism rate among 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 among convicted HIC offenders for each court, taking into account differences in the background characteristics of offenders between the different courts?

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 2016 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 the most recent year (2016) in perspective, these data are compared to the characteristics and recidivism rates of a reference group, namely all convicted offenders in 2016 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 has developed in the past ten years (between 2007 and 2016), alongside actual recidivism rates, adjusted recidivism rates have been calculated. These take into account shifts in the background characteristics of offenders over time (for example gender, age and criminal career). 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.

Within the Netherlands there are 11 courts, each of which deals with cases from within a given geographical area. 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 courts (for example gender, age

and criminal career). This is important because differences in the level of recidivism between courts can be the result of differences in the background characteristics of offenders between courts. To calculate the expected recidivism rates a statistical prediction model was used. Per court, we compared the actual and expected recidivism rates and examined whether or not these differences were statistically significant (p value < 0.05) and relevant (effect size > 0.1). A statistically significant difference indicates that the difference is unlikely to be the result of coincidence. A relevant difference refers to the size of the difference. It is possible for a difference to be statistically significant, but irrelevant due to its negligible size.

Key findings

The most important findings of the study are described below.

Total annual convictions
- All three HIC offender groups show a substantial decrease in the number of convicted offenders between 2002 and 2016. The number of convicted domestic burglars fluctuated over time (between a maximum of 2,759 in 2003 and a minimum of 1,466 in 2016), but over the entire period decreased by 42%. The sharp drop since 2014 in the number of domestic burglars is particularly striking. The number of convicted street robbers shows, with the exception of an increase in 2012, a stable declining trend. The number of convicted street robbers decreased significantly by 75%, from 2,100 in 2002 to 514 in 2016. The number of convicted non-street robbers fluctuated over time (between a maximum of 896 in 2012 and a minimum of 454 in 2016), but over the entire period decreased by 45%. Since 2012, there has been a particularly sharp decline in the number of convicted non-street robbers.

Background characteristics
- Street robbers are relatively young when they commit this offense. At the time of their criminal case, 40% of the convicted street robbers in 2016 were minors, compared to 17% of the convicted non-street robbers, 14% of the convicted domestic burglars and 6% of convicted offenders in general. However, over recent years the percentage of underage convicted offenders has decreased for both street robbery (from 51% in 2006-2007 to 40% in 2014-2016) and domestic burglary (from 26% in 2006-2007 to 14% in 2014-2016). The decline in minor street robbers is the result of a decrease in 12 to 15 year old age category (from 28% in 2007 to 14% in 2016).
- Convicted HIC offenders came into contact with the law for the first time at a young age. This applies in particular to street robbers: 78% of the street robbers convicted in 2016 had their first criminal case under the age of 18. However, of the convicted domestic burglars and non-street robbers respectively 65% and 64% also had their first criminal case as a minor. In contrast, of the total group of offenders convicted in 2016, only 29% had their first criminal case as a minor. In addition, approximately half of the HIC offenders (44% to 53%) had their first criminal case between the ages of 12 and 15, while this is the case for only 17% of the total group of offenders. Over time, it is notable that the percentage of non-street robbers with their first criminal case between the ages of 12 and 15 increased from 30-35% in 2002-2006 to 46% in 2015-2016.
- The criminal history data show that most HIC offenders have had previous contact with the law. In 2016, respectively 83%, 80% and 74% of the convicted

domestic burglars, non-street robbers and street robbers had one or more previous criminal cases. For all convicted offenders this is 60%.
- 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 (HIC) offences. Hence, we do not see high levels of specialization. Of the three groups, domestic burglars tend to specialize the most: 35% has one or more previous criminal cases for domestic burglary.
- Convicted domestic burglars have the most extensive criminal record. In 2016, 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, seven and five previous criminal cases. Between 2002 and 2016, the average number of previous criminal cases did decrease for both domestic burglars (from fifteen to eleven) and non-street robbers (from eleven to eight).
- Of the convicted non-street robbers, in 2016, over a third committed a domestic robbery and two thirds committed other types of non-street robbery (such as a shop robbery or bank robbery). Over time, this distribution has shifted. Although the total number of non-street robbers declined during the research period, within the group of non-street robberies the percentage of domestic robberies increased from 22% in 2002 to 37% in 2016, while the percentage of other types of non-street robbery decreased.
- Convicted street robbers and domestic burglars in 2016 were mostly punished with a short prison sentence of a maximum of six months (respectively 34% and 38%) or with community service (25% and 24%), while the majority of non-street robbers were convicted to a long prison sentence of at least six months (53%).
- The results show that most HIC criminal cases are settled in the Randstad area, namely in the courts of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Midden-Nederland (within which Utrecht falls) and The Hague. In 2016, almost half of all domestic burglary and non-street robbery cases and more than two thirds of all street robbery cases were settled in these courts.

Recidivism rates
- The recidivism analysis shows that 54% of domestic burglars, 53% of street robbers and 43% of non-street robbers convicted in 2016 have had a new criminal case for any offence within two years of their HIC criminal case (general recidivism). The two-year recidivism rate among the total group of convicted offenders is 26%.
- Convicted HIC offenders often reoffend with other offences than their initial HIC offence. This follows from the finding that the HIC recidivism rates (7% to 14%) and special recidivism rates (3% to 12%) 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 in the past ten years (between 2007 and 2016), it appears that two-year general recidivism either decreased or was stable among the three HIC offender groups. This is the case for both the actual and adjusted recidivism rates, which do not differ that much (differences are less than 3 percentage points). The actual recidivism among domestic burglars shows that 57% of domestic burglars convicted in 2007 have had a new criminal case within two years of their HIC criminal case. Over time, this percentage is quite stable; in 2016 the actual recidivism rate among domestic burglars is 54%. The

adjusted recidivism rates among domestic burglars decreased from 59% to 55% in this period. The actual recidivism rates among street robbers shows a small decrease from 53% in 2007 to 50% in 2014, and, subsequently, increased to 52% in 2016. The adjusted recidivism rates among street robbers shows a similar trend: the recidivism rate decreased from 56% in 2007 to 50% in 2014, and, subsequently, increased to 52% in 2016. The actual recidivism rates among non-street robbers decreased from 50% in 2007 to 38% in 2014, and, subsequently, increased to 43% in 2016. The adjusted recidivism rates among non-street robbers (only available between 2012 and 2016) shows a similar trend: the recidivism rate increased from 38-39% in 2012-2014 to 43% in 2016.

- The trend break in the development of recidivism, which was observed in the previous recidivism study among HIC-offenders, appears only to have continued for non-street robbers. Whilst the rising recidivism trends among domestic burglars and street robbers stagnate in 2016, the recidivism rates among non-street robbers continue to rise in 2016. This development of recidivism rates among non-street robbers is striking. Between 2004 and 2013 the strongest decrease in recidivism was seen among non-street robbers (a relative decrease of 28%), only for recidivism among this group of offenders to then show the strongest increase between 2014 and 2016 (a relative increase of 12%).

Expected recidivism per court
- In several courts 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 Overijssel the recidivism rate among street robbers is lower than expected based on the background characteristics included in this study. The actual recidivism rate is 11.2 percentage points lower than the expected recidivism rate of 52%. The effect size is, however, small (0.156). Second, in court Zeeland-West-Brabant, the recidivism rate among non-street robbers is also lower than expected. The actual recidivism rate is 6.9 percentage points lower than the expected recidivism rate of 40%. However, the effect size is again small (0.110).

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 the calculated two-year recidivism rates for non-street robbers may be underestimated. Due to long prison sentences, 15% of the non-street robbers were observed for less than two years and 6% were observed for less than one year. Although survival analysis is the appropriate method to obtain a reliable estimate of the risk of recidivism with different observation periods, these shortened observation periods may have resulted in an underestimation of the recidivism rates. A third 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. 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 fourth

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 courts 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 engage in criminal behaviour from a young age. Two thirds to three quarters of the HIC offenders convicted in the most recent years (between 2013 and 2016) were minors at the time of their first criminal case, and approximately half were between 12 and 15 years old. This is worrying, as prior research has shown that criminal behaviour at a young age is an important predictor of a long and serious criminal career. In addition, prior research has shown that offenders who committed a HIC offence as their debut offence when a minor have the highest chance of becoming a chronic offender. Therefore, preventing criminal behavior, and especially HIC offences, at a young age seems crucial. It is therefore important to intervene early on, preferably before the first HIC offence is committed. Prior research shows that an accumulation of risk factors in childhood and young adolescence (such as aggressive behaviour, substance use, skipping school, and family issues) is a strong predictor for serious criminal behaviour later on. Detecting and addressing risk factors early is likely to help prevent a criminal and HIC career.

Second, the results indicate that the trend break in the development of the recidivism among HIC offenders, which was observed in the previous recidivism study among HIC-offenders, only continues for non-street robbers. Up until 2013 the recidivism rate among all three groups of HIC offenders decreased and in 2014 and 2015 this decrease stagnated or even reversed, resulting in an increase. This study shows that the rising recidivism trends among domestic burglars and street robbers have stagnated in 2016, but that the recidivism rates among non-street robbers continue to rise in 2016. Although the cause of these changes in recidivism rates is unknown and it is unclear how the recidivism trends will develop in the future, it seems important to continue the focus on HIC offenders and on efforts to combat reoffending among these offenders.

Finally, it is notable that the number of convicted HIC offenders since 2002 has dramatically declined (a decrease of 42% among domestic burglars, 45% among non-street robbers and 75% among street robbers), whilst the recidivism rate in the past decennium has not declined at nearly the same rate. In recent years (2014-2016) recidivism rates even stabilized or increased, while the number of convicted HIC offenders in these years continued to decrease significantly. It therefore appears that whilst the number of offenders that commit high impact crimes has decreased, the offenders that remain persist in committing crime. Future research examining the backgrounds and problems of this persistent group of offenders could lead to more insight in the causes of their persistent criminal behavior and might provide starting points for an effective approach.