Summary

Introduction

Commissioned by the Scientific Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of Justice and Security (Min J&V), we conducted a literature search into violence against care workers and other professional groups working under the policy responsibility of the aforementioned ministry. The report leads to conclusions about the nature and extent of violence and aggression against professional groups, the available knowledge about it, its implications for practice and policy and, finally, possible implications for the research agenda for the future.

Professional groups

The professional groups targeted in the study are police officers, firefighters, ambulance employees, special investigating officers (*known as boa's*), traffic controllers, prison staff, members of probation services, employees of youth welfare institutions, employees in the migration chain, including employees of the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) and asylum seekers centres, and public transport employees. Each of these professional groups relates differently to aggression and violence. For police officers, violence is part of their professional repertoire in dealing with aggression and violence by civilians. This also applies to other enforcers, albeit to a lesser extent. Aid and service providers may be confronted with aggression and violence but dealing with it is less obviously a part of their professional profile.

Problem definition

The key issues in this study were:
- The influencing factors described in the literature (physical environment, opportunity, substance use, group pressure, anonymity and offender and victim profile) when it comes to aggression and violence against these professional groups.
- How does aggression and violent behaviour affect the work experience of the above-mentioned professional groups and what are possible and effective approaches, (perspectives for action) that can lead to reduction, or elimination of this behaviour against professionals with a public duty?

Research questions

1. What is the nature and scale of the problem?
   a. What is known in literature about the nature and extent of aggression and violence against professional groups?
2. What factors lead to aggression and violence against professionals?
   a. What factors in the social and societal environment?
   b. What factors in the physical and situational environments? In which situations, or on which occasions do perpetrators show aggression and violence?
   c. What personality and psychological factors? What types of aggression and violence occur against different professional groups according to the literature (in terms of personality characteristics, victim profiles, and perpetrator profiles)?

3. What social developments affect aggression and violence against professionals?
   a. What developments, that could influence aggression and violence against professionals and its impact are described in literature?
4. What solutions and directions for solutions can be found in literature?
   a. What effective, or promising perspectives for action, and measures to reduce aggression and violence against professionals with a public function are described in literature?

Based on the answers to these research questions, conclusions were drawn regarding:

- The most important causes, or triggers of violence and aggression against the professional groups and the most important similarities and differences in this respect between these professional groups.
- The most important contexts (including personal characteristics and offender profiles) in which violence and aggression occur and may escalate.
- Measures that may work out well for the different professional groups, and potential perspectives for action that may bring about societal changes.
- Important research questions to be answered in follow-up studies.

Research design

The research consisted of the systematic collection and analysis of scientific literature on the above research questions in the period from 2006 to today, and in addition to that a search in the references of the sources found. The thus collected set of sources were analysed systematically. Experts were consulted to see whether additional information from current research was available. Two focus group sessions were organised to discuss the findings of the researchers and their implications with scientists and practitioners.

Finally, based on all the research steps outlined, the researchers formulated conclusions and implications for policy development, professional development and further research.

Literature inventory

Not for all professional groups specific data appeared to be available. The table below shows the extent to which scientific literature was found about the various professional groups.

In this table it becomes clear that for a few professional groups no, or a limited number of publications are available. Particularly for boas, traffic controllers and probation officers no specific facts and figures were found.

Research Question/ Professional Group	Generic	Police	BOA	Traffic wardens	Debt collectors	Ambulance	Fire brigade	Prison staff	Probation	Youth services	Migration	Public transport
Facts and figures			*									
Factors related to violence			*									
Societal factors			*									
Action perspectives			*									

Legend
0 studies
1-5 studies
6-10 studies
11-15 studies
> 15 studies

* Parallel to this study, commissioned by the WODC, a study into the working conditions of special investigation officers (known as boa's) was conducted by researchers from DSP. That study was completed after we completed the literature review our study. As a result, we were only able to include the results of the DSP study in the concluding chapter of this report.

Nature and scale of aggression and violence against professional groups

The monitor studies included show that aggression and violence against employees with a public duty in a general sense, specifically in verbal aggression, physical aggression and intimidation has decreased and then stabilised. This fits into the larger picture that in Dutch society the extent of aggression and violence has been decreasing for some time now. However, when we zoom in on the specific professional groups, not always a decrease is shown. For example, the extent of aggression and violence against debt collectors, fire brigades and prison and youth care workers have increased. In the case of train crews and ambulance crews, however, we do see a decrease. However, the experienced level of violence in the investigated professions is reported to be high. As for firemen data show, that less than 50% of them experience aggression and violence annually. This percentage is much higher among police, train staff and debt collectors. There are, however, comments to be made about the analyses:

1. The literature provides information about the nature and extent of aggression and violence, but to a much lesser extent offers explanations of it, or of its decrease, or increase;
2. In the last few years, approximately from 2016 onwards, central monitors have been stopped or left to individual organisations;
3. The collected data provide a fragmented picture because data on the various professional groups have been registered, and analysed to varying degrees;
4. There have been shifting definitions of violence. As a consequence, aggression and violence have been monitored on different aspects;
5. In the analyses of differences between occupational groups many blanks were found. For example, no studies were found on factors related to aggression and violence against boa's, debt collectors, traffic controllers, probation officers and youth care workers.

Factors influencing aggression and violence towards professionals

Individual factors (victims and perpetrators) in the social and societal environment

In cases of aggression and violence against the police, we see that offenders are often young men. Alcohol and drugs often play a role. Offenders often belong to groups already known to the police. Aggression and violence by people with a mental disorder are also mentioned. The way in which

professionals perceive and interpret situations affects their behaviour, and thus influences the development of aggression and violence in such situations.

Perpetrator and victim factors in the physical and situational environment

The literature review found factors related to the extent to which aggression and violence occur in certain situations. Many factors seem obvious. Those who have more contacts with citizens run a higher risk; if these contacts take place at late hours, in nightlife, aggression and violence occur more frequently. In addition to factors in the direct setting, factors related to working conditions are mentioned, such as the nature and sizes of appointments; the years of experience on the job, the extent to which colleagues are available as backup; and the extent to which employers provide adequate support through education, training, or follow up after an incident.

Personal and psychological factors of offender and victim

As far as personal and psychological factors are concerned, the results of the literature review are limited. Literature does describe general characteristics of perpetrators, but without an empirical basis. On the part of the professionals, level of education, years of experience, views on society and social groups are mentioned as influencing factors but insufficiently explained.

The interaction between perpetrator and victim factors

As far as the interactions between perpetrators and victims are concerned, types of interactions are mentioned in terms of who is dealing with whom, and in what types of situations. The influence this has on the way a professional enters a situation is mentioned. Explanations of behaviour are again lacking in the included literature.

Social influences on aggression and violence towards professionals

A number of studies refer to relevant social developments affecting aggression and violence. However, to a lesser extent these studies refer to specific professional groups. The general developments mentioned are: (1) General trend of decreasing crime; (2) Paul Schnabel's five I's (internationalisation; individualisation, informalisation, computerisation and intensification); (3) An authority crisis and declining confidence in government; (4) Demographic developments (ageing, dejuvenation and immigration); (5) Developments in leisure behaviour and the use of alcohol and drugs; (6) Developments in adjacent policy domains (Health care and the social domain); (7) The changing role of (social) media; (8) The deployment of police officers (increasingly on the harder tasks).

In general, the relationship between social development and aggression and violence against the professions studied has been poorly studied and researched. The included studies identify a number of interesting factors but do not explain in depth the aggression and violence used against civil servants with a public function. The included literature deals to a lesser extent with (major) events in society, such as the economic crisis, the attack on the Twin Towers, terrorist attacks, the MH 17 disaster, and trends such as the increased inequality in society and how this affects people's feelings of (in)security and (un)safety, and how such feelings may be more likely to lead to aggression and violence.

Solution paths

The directions of action found in the literature analysed do not cover all professional groups, nor do they differentiate between professional groups. In the literature following types of solutions are suggested:

- Mapping the problems by focusing on adequate registration and analysis of aggression and violence against professional groups.
- Developing behavioural guidelines and protocols for each type of situation.
- Training courses in social skills, resilience, assessing risks in situations, dealing with dilemmas.
- Equipping professional groups with means to deploy and, or control violence.
- Peer support in risk situations between emergency services and with the Public Prosecution Service.
- Strengthening the support role and care role of organisations and managers.

Although these lines of action offer perspectives, they do have two major weaknesses. First, they were often not evaluated in terms of effectiveness. Secondly, the literature does not describe them in much detail.

Review and Perspective

The research often provides no, or insufficiently specific, answers to the research questions for each professional group. Little is clear about specific causes, or triggers of violence and aggression. However, ingredients have been mentioned that together may form building blocks of a conceptual framework to be further developed. The following factors play a role in such framework:

- offender profiles (age, gender, social background, use of resources, history of violence);
- victim profiles (gender, years of experience, appointment, education and training and other learning experiences, previous experiences of violence, self-image, etc.);
- the interaction between victim and perpetrator. Studies are known about escalating and de-escalating behaviour during enforcer-citizen encounters;
- job descriptions, professional profiles and competence profiles of the various professional groups and, in particular, specifically as far as dealing with aggression and violence is concerned;
- context factors (appointment, time of day, risk areas/events, backup by colleagues, support from managers/organisations).

In order to understand the dynamics, and effective mechanisms of the factors and the interactions between them, social theories may provide explanations of the occurrence, the development and management of aggression and violence between offenders, between offenders and victims, and from practitioners towards the offenders. Here too, the aforementioned theories of escalation and de-escalation may play a role. Also, more generic social psychological theories such as social learning theories, and theories of biological development may be helpful. Theories on mental health and disorder may play a role when it concerns aggression and violence of people with psychological problems, or disorders. In addition to explanations of aggression and violence, interaction theories are available that may contribute to the interaction between offender and victim in a concrete setting. On the one hand, this concerns the theories about escalation and de-escalation; on the other hand, it also concerns evaluation studies of training programmes. A number of studies show that

years of experience play a role. This feeds the idea that the members of the studied professional groups go through stages of professional development with specific needs for support.

Implications

Bases on the conclusions of the study a number of implications for policy development, professional development and further research were identified.

Policy

The study shows that the nationwide system of registration and monitoring that was built up during many years was no longer continued in recent years. It is important to pick up the thread again.
We advocate a continuation of a coordinated form of monitoring, consisting of three components:

- a registration/monitoring system, which is kept decentrally;
- a dashboard, which is maintained both centrally and de-centrally and which serves as feedback on national and regional initiatives to prevent or reduce aggression and violence;
- a knowledge base at central level. Such a knowledge base should form the knowledge background against which observations can be interpreted.

There is no need for annual reporting. Reporting is only needed when deviating patterns are shown on the dashboard (increase or decrease), for which an explanation needs to be found in order to further prevent aggression and violence.

Professional development

With regard to professional development, various kinds of education and training were mentioned. These courses often appear not to have been evaluated sufficiently. The following actions were mentioned:

- Education and training with regard to de-escalation.
- Further exploration of the social information processing (SIP) model (aimed at influencing the perceptions of risk situations), and other models of social learning.
- Inter-professional learning, in order to strengthen the link between practitioners, and broaden competences per professional group.
- Using a monitor as a base of feedback in order to promote professional learning.

Research

Based on the analyses we recommend that the monitoring activities be continued in a coordinated manner.

Registration and monitoring

A monitor leads to meaningful interpretations when data are collected against the background of a practical theoretical framework.

> **Possible research question**
> How can an aggression and violence monitor system as described above, including a registration system, a dashboard and knowledge base be elaborated and developed?
>
> **Sub questions**
> 1. What is the current knowledge about monitoring and registration tools used for the various professional groups?
> 2. How can existing monitors be incorporated into a consistent over-all system?
> 3. Which organisation, or organisations may best implement this system?
> 4. How can a monitor be set up in such a way that it provides concise feedback on the effects of policy measures against aggression and violence towards professionals: such as measures aimed at knowledge building; attitude change (among citizens; perpetrators; victims and employers), and prosecution?

Realistic and practical evaluations

We recommend that the analysis of the recorded data will be done in the context of evaluations aimed at practical added value and focussing on an assessment of what works. A good way of working is to make a distinction between approaches which are proven effective, promising, unpromising and proven ineffective.

> **Examples of evaluation questions are**
> 1. What are the main reasons, triggers of aggression and violence against professionals?
> 2. What types of measures aimed at either knowledge development; or attitude change of citizens; perpetrators; victims, employers, or prosecution contribute to the reduction, or control of such aggression and violence?
> 3. Which (mix of) interventions turns out to be effective in different types of situations relevant to practitioners?
> 4. Which forms of education, training or exercising aimed at reducing aggression and violence against professionals have proven to be effective, promising, not promising, or proven ineffective?
> 5. Under which circumstances do training courses on the de-escalation of violence and aggression have the best effects?

In-depth research

Research has shown that research is often more conclusive than explanatory. This already led to the conclusion that evaluations should be more explanatory in nature. The same applies to research. In order to be able to offer explanations, theories, or further theory development is necessary.

> **Possible research questions**
> Explanatory research questions:
> 1. Which individual characteristics of perpetrators influence his/her aggressive/violent behaviour?
> 2. Which individual characteristics of victims influence the degree of his/her aggression and violence?
> 3. Which theories and models are available to better understand and control the problems of aggression and violence?
> 4. How is it that some offenders with specific profiles commit relatively more violence and aggression?
> 5. Which actions of professionals have escalating, or de-escalating effects in different types of situations?
> 6. What courses exist, or can be developed, to further train professionals in dealing with aggression and violence against professionals?
> 7. What measures against aggression and violence should be prioritized in view of costs and effects?

Where the theory analysed does not provided sufficient answers to the research questions, studies may be carried out in other professions dealing with similar issues of order, discipline, or violence, such as teachers, referees, inspectors, lawyers.