

Summary

Criminal careers of offenders of high-impact crimes

The term high-impact crimes (HIC) has been used in the Netherlands to indicate offences that have a major impact on the victim and society, and include domestic burglary, street robbery and non-street robbery. Previous studies have shown that HIC offenders are an active offender group, who often engage in criminal behavior from a young age, commit a large number of offences and do not limit themselves to one type of offence. There are reasons to assume that HIC offenders have extensive criminal careers and that they differ from criminal careers of non-HIC offenders, both in nature and size. Various international studies have been carried out to study criminal careers of HIC offenders, but this is not the case in the Netherlands. To understand criminal careers of HIC offenders in the Netherlands, criminal behavior has to be studied over longer periods of time.

The current study, as part of a five-year research program into recidivism among HIC offenders, examined criminal behavior from early adolescence to adulthood. The main goals of the research were to provide insights in characteristics of criminal careers of HIC offenders, describe patterns of criminal behavior throughout these careers, and study the extent to which the type of offence in the first criminal case and the age at the time of the first criminal case are related to the duration and size of the criminal career. Results of this study might prove to be valuable in determining the offender type to focus on in reducing the amount of HIC offenders with a long and serious criminal career. The study consisted of three parts which will be briefly explained below, including the corresponding research questions.

Characteristics of the criminal career

Whether or not people engage in criminal activities, the onset and termination age of these activities, as well as the frequency and variety in which they occur are important parameters of criminal careers. Therefore, the first research question is as follows:

- 1 What are the characteristics of the criminal careers of HIC and non-HIC offenders in terms of onset age, termination age, duration, frequency and specialization?

Offender trajectories

Offender trajectories focus on the frequency of offences, which are plotted against the age of offenders to get insights into age-crime curves of criminal behavior. One of the most well-known typologies distinguishes between two offender trajectories: adolescence-limited (AL) offenders and life-course-persistent (LCP) offenders. These two offender groups are often found in studies on criminal trajectories, mostly in combination with one or two additional trajectories. Moreover, previous research concludes that people who start with criminal behavior at a young age are more likely to engage in longer and more serious criminal careers than people who start

a later age. To examine whether this is true for HIC offenders, we answered the following two research questions:

- 2a Which offender trajectories can be found, in terms of the frequency of criminal cases, during the criminal career among the three types of HIC offenders, and do these trajectories differ from trajectories of non-HIC offenders?
- 2b Do the offender trajectories, in terms of the frequency of criminal cases, differ between the three types of HIC offenders based on the age at the time of their first criminal case?

The role of the debut offence

Previous studies in England and Sweden have shown that offenders who start their criminal career with a domestic burglary, street robbery, non-street robbery or car theft have a high risk of a large number of future offences. This risk further increases if the debut offence is committed at a younger age. To examine whether this is true for HIC offenders in the Netherlands, we answered the following two research questions:

- 3a Is the type of offence in the first criminal case related to the frequency of future criminal cases?
- 3b Is the relation between the type of offence in the first criminal case and the frequency of future criminal cases related to the age at the time of the first criminal case?

Method

Data

This research used 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 attention of the Public Prosecution Service is included in this research. Statistical analyses were based on criminal cases, since analyses on individual offences require a new, yet to be developed method for using the OBJD.

Research groups

In order to answer the first and second research question we selected two cohorts: all persons with a criminal case between 2002 and 2004 and all persons with a criminal case between 2010 and 2012. Both cohorts were divided in a group of HIC offenders and non-HIC offenders: HIC offenders had at least one criminal case consisting of a HIC offence during their criminal career; non-HIC offenders never had a criminal case consisting of a HIC offence during their criminal career. In order to answer the third research question we only selected offenders who had their first criminal case in 2002-2004 or 2010-2012 (referred to as HIC debut offenders and non-HIC debut offenders).

Analyses

In the first part of the research we presented descriptive statistics to provide insight in the nature and size of criminal careers of HIC offenders and non-HIC offenders. In the second part of the research, criminal careers of these offenders were plotted in aggregated offender trajectories using semi-parametric group-based trajectory modelling (SPGM). In the third part of the research, HIC debut offenders (people with a HIC offence in their first criminal case) and non-HIC debut offenders (people without HIC offence in their first criminal case) were compared in terms of the frequency of criminal cases and the risk of becoming a chronic offender throughout their criminal career. The same analyses were performed on nine specific types of HIC debut offences (domestic burglary, street robbery and non-street robbery) and non-HIC debut offences (theft, abuse, threatening and stalking, public order, public authority, and driving under influence).

Key findings

Characteristics of the criminal career

- Compared to non-HIC offenders, HIC offenders start their criminal career at a younger age. Among HIC offenders, street robbers are youngest at the time of their first criminal case.
- HIC offenders and non-HIC offenders terminate their criminal behavior at about the same age. Among HIC offenders, street robbers are youngest at the time of their last criminal case. The termination age is highest among domestic burglars.
- HIC offenders are criminally active for longer periods of time than non-HIC offenders. Among HIC offenders, domestic burglars have the longest criminal careers while street robbers have the shortest criminal careers.
- Throughout their criminal career, HIC offenders have a higher number of criminal cases than non-HIC offenders. This is especially notable because they spend more time in detention than non-HIC offenders (slightly less than a year vs. a month). Among HIC offenders, domestic burglars have the highest number of criminal cases.
- Both HIC offenders and non-HIC offenders can be considered generalists, committing a variety of offences. HIC offenders even specialize a bit less than non-HIC offenders. Moreover, HIC offenders are not inclined to commit different HIC offences: domestic burglars commit few street robberies and non-street robberies, street robbers commit few domestic burglaries and non-street robberies, and non-street robbers commit few domestic burglaries and street robberies.

Offender trajectories

- In general, we found four offender trajectories among HIC offenders. First, we found a group of low frequent offenders who have relatively few criminal cases. Second, we found two groups of moderate frequent offenders who have more criminal cases – one group with offenders most actively engaged in criminal behavior in their twenties and one group with offenders most actively engaged in criminal behavior in their thirties and forties. Third, we found a group of high frequent offenders who start with criminal behavior at a young age, have a high number of criminal cases and remain active for a long time.

- Non-HIC offenders do not have a trajectory of high frequent offenders, unlike all groups of HIC offenders.
- For the subgroups of HIC offenders two findings stand out: domestic burglars have the highest share of high frequent offenders, and street robbers do not have a trajectory of low frequent offenders.
- An early start of the criminal career increases the likelihood of following the trajectory of moderate and high frequent offenders.

The role of the first offence

- HIC debut offenders have significantly more criminal cases throughout their criminal career than non-HIC debut offenders. The age at the time of the debut offence also matters: non-HIC debut offenders who commit their first offence at a relatively late age have the fewest criminal cases throughout their career, while HIC debut offenders who commit their first offence when they are a minor have the highest number of criminal cases. Moreover, HIC offenders have a higher chance of becoming a frequent offender than non-HIC offenders.
- When looking at nine specific HIC and non-HIC offences we found that people who start with a street robbery have the highest number of criminal cases and the highest risk of becoming a frequent offender, followed by offenders who debut with theft (a non-HIC offence), domestic burglary and non-street robbery. For nearly all nine offences it was found that offenders who commit their debut offence when they are a minor have significantly higher numbers of criminal cases than offenders who start their criminal career at a later age.

Limitations

Although this study contains a wealth of valuable information about the criminal careers of HIC offenders in the Netherlands, it also knows a few limitations. First, several methodological decisions had to be made, such as the number of offence categories and the number of offender trajectories to take into account, and how to distinguish between HIC offenders and non-HIC offenders. These decisions were well-thought-out and, in our opinion, best match the goals of the current study. However, the fact remains that other decisions could have been made as well. Second, this study used register data from the OBJD. As a consequence, we only studied criminal activities that were brought to the attention of the Public Prosecution Service. Offences and offenders that remained under the radar were not taken into account. Further, we studied criminal behavior at the level of criminal cases instead of the separate offences within these cases. As a result, we underestimated the total frequency of criminal behavior. However, this holds true for all studies that rely on register data as not nearly all criminal activity is recorded and tracked down. Third, we do not have information about criminogenic factors of HIC offenders. While the current study describes criminal careers, we cannot explain why certain offenders have a long and active criminal career while others terminate their criminal activities at an earlier stage.

To conclude

Summing up, we can first conclude that HIC offenders start their criminal career at a relatively young age and terminate their career at about the same age as non-HIC

offenders. As such, HIC offenders tend to have a longer criminal career than non-HIC offenders. Further, the average HIC offender commits far more offences than a non-HIC offender, even though they spend more time in detention. HIC offenders and non-HIC offenders alike are generalists when it comes to their criminal activities, with HIC offenders specializing even less than non-HIC offenders.

The second conclusion is that offender trajectories differ between HIC and non-HIC offenders. Only HIC offenders follow trajectories of high frequent, persistent offenders, while the majority of non-HIC offenders belong to the group of low frequent offenders. The share of low frequent offenders is larger among non-HIC offenders than among HIC offenders. Further, low frequent offenders are absent among street robbers, even though the criminal careers of the three groups of HIC offenders largely overlap. Finally we can state that an early start of the criminal career increases the likelihood that offenders belong to the group of moderate or high frequent offenders.

The third conclusion is that offenders who debut with a HIC offence have more criminal cases throughout their career and a significantly higher risk of becoming frequent offenders than those who debut with a non-HIC offence. These risks further increase when the first offence is committed at a young age. When looking at nine different HIC and non-HIC offences, it turned out that offenders who debut with a street robbery tend to have the highest number of criminal offences and the highest risk of becoming a frequent offender, followed by people who debut with theft (a non-HIC offence), a domestic burglary, and a non-street robbery.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, several policy recommendations can be made. A first recommendation is to keep paying attention to HIC offenders, as the current study shows that HIC offenders have more active and longer criminal career than non-HIC offenders. In recent years, the Dutch government has put in a lot of effort to prevent HIC offences and should do so in the coming years. A lot of future criminal activity could be prevented if interventions aimed at desistance among HIC offenders are successful. A second and related recommendation for policy is to intervene early, given the fact that offenders who debut at a young age with a HIC offence or theft are more likely to have a long and serious criminal career. These offenders run the risk of becoming future frequent offenders. By early identification of these offenders and addressing the risk factors that may accumulate during adolescence – hereby increasing the likelihood of criminal behavior (such as family problems, substance use and aggressive behavior) – a criminal career might be prevented.

The results this study also provide recommendations for future research. First, it is important to gain a better understanding of *why* criminal careers develop in a certain way. With this in mind, it would be valuable to enrich register data from the OBDJ with offenders' socio-economic and demographic characteristics (such as family situation, employment status, and neighborhood characteristics). These additions make it possible, for instance, to investigate why some criminals debut with a HIC offence, therefore running a higher risk of having an extensive criminal career, while others debut with different offences. Second, it would be good if future studies would consider adding a qualitative component to their research design, for instance by including personal stories of offenders or other people related to the

offenders. Although quantitative methods form an excellent way to explain developments in criminal behavior at an aggregated level, numbers alone cannot tell the whole story. Personal stories of offenders can result in new research questions, inspire new methods and measurements which can be included in large-scale quantitative research, and could be an important step in the development of person-oriented interventions aimed at preventing future offences.