

**Images of violence**  
**A mixed-method study into violence and aggression against  
journalists**

***Summary***



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## Background to the study

Over the past few years, a large number of journalists have been treated violently or aggressively in different ways. This problem is not just a recent occurrence. In a democratic state under the rule of law, free news gathering is of crucial importance and journalists should be able to do their work in freedom and safety. However, this is called into question when journalists experience an increased threat of violence against their profession. It is for this reason that violence against journalists has been a focus of the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) for some time. In the Netherlands, violence and aggression against journalists has also recently become an area of concern. This is evident, among other things, from the establishment of PersVeilig at the end of 2019 on the joint initiative of the Dutch Association of Journalists (NVJ), the Dutch Association of Chief Editors (NGH), the Police and the Public Prosecution Service (OM).

There is also greater awareness of the subject in the political sphere. In the Dutch Lower Chamber of Parliament, in a motion as part of the legislative proposal to extend the community service ban<sup>1</sup> it was considered to apply the ban in case of the abuse of journalists and publicists who are gathering news as part of their work. At the time, the motion was advised against by the then Minister of Justice and Security Ferdinand Grapperhaus and was not adopted.<sup>2</sup> However, a promise was made to investigate the possible extension of the community service ban for journalists and, in a broader sense, to also investigate the extent to which the *“position of journalists [...] has become more vulnerable.”* This promise was reconfirmed during the parliamentary debate on violence against journalists on 9 September 2021. This current study follows from this promised investigation, which was conducted on behalf of the WODC.

## Research questions and research method

The study consists of three research questions, each subdivided into a number of sub-questions:

### **Research question 1 What are the nature and extent of perceived and experienced violence against journalists in the Netherlands and to what extent has this changed over the past ten years?**

#### Sub-questions

- a) Which figures are available about the extent and development of violence against journalists and how reliable and valid are these figures?
- b) What are the similarities and differences in trends in violence among other occupational groups (particularly officials with a public task)?
- c) What is the nature and development of (perceived and registered) violence against journalists over the past ten years?
- d) How can developments in the nature and extent of (perceived and recorded) violence against journalists be explained?
- e) Which influence do the different forms of (perceived and registered) violence have on victims and on the profession of journalism?
- f) To what extent has media coverage of violence against journalists changed over the past ten years?

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<sup>1</sup> *Kamerstukken II 2020/21, 35528, no. 15 (and no. 13)*. It is similar to the (adopted) motion on criminal prosecution for threatening journalists, *Parliamentary Papers II 2020/21, 35564, no. 12*.

<sup>2</sup> *Handelingen II 2020/21, no. 51, item 8*.

**Research question 2 Which offenders and victims can be differentiated with regard to the various types of violence against journalists?**

Sub-questions

- a) In general terms, what are the background characteristics of offenders and victims involved in the various categories of violence against journalists?
- b) Which motives can be attributed to the various types of offenders?

**Research question 3 Which policy interventions could be effective in reducing or combatting violence against journalists and to what extent could it be useful to extend the community service ban in this context?**

Sub-questions

- a) Which policy interventions are potentially effective in reducing violence against journalists or are otherwise appropriate?
- b) Are there any examples in the literature of successful interventions in other (EU) countries?
- c) Based on the analysis of violent incidents and offender characteristics, what can be concluded about potentially effective policy interventions?
- d) Which added value could the policy interventions – particularly further expansion of the community service ban – have in this respect?
- e) How can the terms ‘journalist’ and ‘journalism’ be defined and demarcated for the purposes of legislation and regulations?

In this study, we have chosen in the first place to focus primarily on the experiences of journalists. This provided us with a detailed image of the diverse types of violence that are perceived as problematic by various journalists, how they deal with them, which causes they attribute to that violence and which possible solutions might exist. In this study, we also combine different research methods so that in the various chapters we can focus on a different aspect of the violence against journalists.

By combining research methods, we can draw a detailed image of the nature and extent of the violence and its offenders and victims, as well as possible policy interventions in order to tackle the problem. We began by conducting a literature study for which we analysed all the relevant national and international research on violence against journalists. Besides a general literature study into the nature, extent and development of violence against journalists, we conducted a country study in which we highlighted three countries in particular – Norway, Germany and France – to find out which problems are prevalent in those countries, which policy measures are being taken and whether we could derive best practices from them. In addition, the total of 412 (anonymised) reports that were made to PersVeilig in 2021 and up to September 2022 were analysed for this study. Besides studying the incidents registered by PersVeilig, we also analysed 37 criminal cases (from the period 2010-2019) in which violence against journalists led to a prosecution or a decision to prosecute. To gain an insight into the way media coverage of violence against journalists developed between January 2012 and September 2022, we analysed 1,800 media reports related to violence against journalists. Along with an analysis of the traditional media, we also performed a partly computer-assisted analysis of tweets addressed to journalists between 1 January 2021 and 30 June 2022. Furthermore, 28 in-depth interviews were held with journalists and editors-in-chief to gain an understanding of the experiences of different types of journalists with aggression and violence and the impact of this, as well as to get

a clearer idea of the offenders of the violence and how journalists view the way violence is being tackled. In doing this, we tried to reach a diverse group of respondents in terms of the type of journalist and their background characteristics. Finally, towards the end of the study, we held an expert meeting with six experts in which we discussed the findings of our study and the possible measures and policy interventions that could follow on from this.

All the collected data provide an insight into (part of) the problem of violence against journalists. At the same time, they all have their limitations, which we explain in more detail in the relevant chapters.

## Answers to research questions

### 1. Nature, scale and developments

The first research question that was central to this study was: What are the nature and extent of experienced and perceived violence against journalists in the Netherlands and to what extent has this changed over the past 10 years?

#### *Existing research*

In Chapter 2, we zoomed in on the existing research into violence against journalists. The international literature shows that violence against journalists is a global problem that is affecting a substantial proportion of journalists. According to the results of various studies, violence against journalists also appears to be common in the Netherlands. To outline the seriousness of the problem, the recent study by Van Hal and Klein Kranenburg (2021) is often cited, in which 82% of the respondents stated that they sometimes had to deal with aggression and threats. In the first instance, this percentage would seem to indicate an increase in violence when compared to previous research. The percentage of 82% is also higher than the figure determined by most international studies conducted in Western countries, which suggests that the problem is greater in the Netherlands than in comparable countries. Because the studies all have different questions, study populations and response rates, it cannot be concluded from a superficial comparison of the percentages that the problem of violence against journalists is greater in the Netherlands than in other countries, nor that the problem in the Netherlands has increased in recent years. Most studies are survey studies which, due to a number of methodological limitations, can only be generalised to a limited extent to the entire population of journalists. Partly for this reason, we have used various additional sources in this study to gain an insight into what is hidden behind the percentages. We have done this to highlight both registered and unregistered aspects of violence against journalists.

#### *An image of registered violence*

In Chapter 3, we mapped out the registered reality of violence against journalists based on a study of criminal files, reports to PersVeilig and a media analysis. To do this, we analysed 37 criminal files from the last 10 years (or more), studied 412 incidents reported to PersVeilig from 2021 to 2022 and, finally, analysed media coverage of violence against journalists. This involved a total of 1,800 reports from the period January 2012 to September 2022. Despite the fact that PersVeilig can report incidents involving violence or aggression against journalists in a central and (largely) structured way, due to the limited time period of the reports we analysed (January 2021 to September 2022) it is not possible to say anything meaningful about the extent or development of the wider phenomenon of violence against journalists based on this source. Since 2019 – the year when PersVeilig was founded – the number of reports made to the organisation has continued to increase up to 2022. Over the past year,

2022, the number of reports seems to have decreased somewhat. Partly due to the relatively low willingness among journalists to report incidents, it is likely that these sources also only expose part of the scale of violence against journalists.

The analysed media items give a more accurate picture of the scale and development of the registered violence against journalists in the Netherlands. The year 2020 seems to be an important tipping point in this regard. Before 2020, there was incidental coverage of this subject, but from the beginning of 2020 the number of items about violence against journalists in the Netherlands increased explosively. Similarly to the PersVeilig reports, however, this increase does not seem to continue and the number of items on this subject was seen to reduce in the course of 2022. It should be noted that recent media attention for the subject is less closely related to the actual number of reported incidents and more to generating attention for the problem. The media coverage of the subject can therefore be explicitly linked to a growing social awareness of the problem of violence against journalists. PersVeilig and the NVJ seem to be playing an important signalling and agenda-setting role in this. This is not just apparent from the media items but is also mentioned in the interviews we conducted with journalists.

The sources we studied also provide a clear image of the nature of the recorded violence against journalists. In both the criminal cases and the PersVeilig reports, the overriding image is one of photographers or cameramen who are confronted on the spot with quite impulsive, spontaneous and emotional outbursts of verbal aggression or even physical violence by persons directly involved in an incident or bystanders (for similar findings, see Van Hal & Klein Kranenburg, 2021: 11).

#### *Online violence*

The literature study and our analysis of PersVeilig reports and criminal cases also point to the role of types of online violence, such as intimidation and threats, but also online hate. The literature study also shows that a substantial portion of the intimidation of journalists takes place online. In Chapter 4, we therefore conducted an analysis of 'mentions' by journalists and publicists who are active on Twitter. We performed a computer-assisted content analysis of tweets directed at 1,663 Dutch journalists on Twitter between 1 January 2021 and 30 June 2022. We chose Twitter because it is the most frequently used social media platform by Dutch journalists. The search yielded approximately 4.8 million tweets, an average of more than 8,500 per day. We examined approximately 1 million of these messages to check whether they were hateful, threatening or neither. The analysis reveals that online hate is a problem that affects many journalists of all backgrounds *personally*. It should be noted that the vast majority of tweets, although not always friendly, were not necessarily hateful. In addition, not all hateful tweets were directly addressed to the journalist in question. With regard to the online hate that was explicitly aimed at the journalists in question, online hate takes various forms, depending on specific aspects of their (social) identity and roles, such as sexism, racism, fat shaming, ageism, etc. Some of the hateful tweets also reflected a wider mistrust of journalism as a profession. Furthermore, we found no strong quantitative differences between certain groups in terms of the amount of hate directed at them. It should be noted that online hate has a highly subjective character, just as the weighting of the seriousness of specific forms of hate speech is dictated by personal experiences of social vulnerability.

#### *Experiences with violence*

In Chapter 5, we described the violence as it is experienced and perceived by journalists. We conducted 28 semi-structured interviews, usually lasting approximately one hour, with a diverse group

of editors-in-chief, (photo/camera) journalists, publicists and columnists (including two interviews with representatives from the sector). The interviews with journalists particularly show that there are major differences in the extent to which journalists ascertain that violence is involved and when they perceive it as a problem. The frequency of violence also differs greatly from person to person. The interviews also clearly show that not only specific experiences with violence determine how journalists define this problem but that their views and definitions are also influenced by stories they hear from, and about, colleagues. Media portrayals and broader experiences of hatred and hostility against the profession also play a role in respondents' perceptions of the broader issue of violence against journalists. The perceptions of journalists seem to be related to the personality and their social position – for example, in terms of their profession, political affiliation, sex/gender and cultural background. In our research, we have tried to highlight as many aspects of the problem as possible as objectively as possible. Yet, our own social positions inevitably also played a role in the interpretation of data and analysis of the problem.

Because there are differences in the way violence is experienced by journalists, the impact is also different. While some respondents down played and normalised of the violence and its consequences, for a small group of journalists the violence had a significant impact on their personal lives. There were also respondents who initially indicated that the personal impact was limited but who gave examples in the course of the interview that showed that the violence had had a definite impact on them. The interviews also revealed that the violence that is experienced has an effect on the way journalists practice their profession. Journalists particularly mention that they consider their way of reporting news more carefully, that they think about their posture on the street and that some also avoid certain topics or situations. Editors-in-chief also point out that in exceptional cases they consider not reporting on events. Hence, there is a definite 'chilling effect' here as a consequence of the fear of violence.

#### *Link with broader social developments*

The analyses of all the different data sources show that some of the violence against journalists cannot be seen separately from broader social developments, particularly the corona pandemic and subsequent tensions, the hardened political climate and changing ideas about the role of journalism. Many journalists spoke of a hardened journalistic climate in which some journalists are regarded as extensions of the established political order. A parallel can be drawn here with violence against other public officials and authorities. Moreover, several respondents point out that the hostile attitude towards journalists is fuelled by how journalists are portrayed by certain politicians. The fact that journalists themselves call each other to account (online) is also mentioned as a circumstance that contributes to this. In addition, there also seems to be a certain polarisation in the way violence is perceived: journalists on the left side of the political spectrum report that they experience aggression from the (extreme) right, while journalists on the right report that they experience aggression from the (extreme) left. Social media platforms such as Twitter, although also appreciated by many journalists, lower the threshold for expressing threats and hate.

## 2. Offenders and victims of violence

The second research question that was central to this study was: Which offenders and victims can be differentiated with regard to the various types of violence against journalists?

Because violence against journalists is a diffuse problem that manifests itself in various forms, highlighting offender and victim characteristics by no means produces a clear image.

#### *Characteristics and motives of offenders*

The existing literature offers very little insight into the characteristics and motives of offenders of violence against journalists. Our research provides a (modest) addition to this. The results are described in Chapter 3. From the PersVeilig reports we studied, we were able to obtain just a fragmentary picture of the offenders of violence. That is because this section is not a mandatory field to be completed when submitting a report. It can be deduced from this information that it mainly concerns bystanders and persons who were present at an incident and who behaved physically or verbally aggressively towards the journalist who was there. In the majority of cases, nothing was reported about the background characteristics of these offenders.

The criminal cases we studied generally contained more information about the offenders but that information does not provide a complete or unambiguous picture (because of the low number of criminal cases). In the criminal cases we see that in the majority of cases it concerns men of different ages who live in the Randstad conurbation and are employed. In a few cases, social or other problems were reported in the criminal files, but based on the information in the file it could not be determined with certainty whether these problems also had an influence on the violent incident. The violence often seems to involve 'ordinary' people who act or react on the spot due to the circumstances of the case.

The motives of the offenders can also only be identified to a limited extent. Rarely any information about the motives could be derived from the PersVeilig reports. However, the criminal cases did provide some insight into this. The main pattern that emerges is that the act of violence was motivated by dissatisfaction with (possible) publication, with some offenders acting out of emotion to prevent publication. The actions of the offender seem largely to be determined by the situation. When we examine motives for violence as identified in studies into violence against public officials, we see parallels with the results of a study into threats against the police (Dekkers, Kriek & Stouten, 2006). The latter research shows that the threats were often an expression of anger or impotence, often impulsive and not so much as a calculated act, or were intended as a way of imposing the offender's will on the journalist (Bovenkerk et al., 2005; Dekkers, Kriek & Stouten, 2006). This is also reflected in the types of violence against journalists in the current study, particularly in the various contexts that we will discuss below.

#### *Characteristics of victims*

In Chapter 3, we also discussed the characteristics of the victims of violence. In criminal cases, we find that the victims are predominantly men of varying ages. The PersVeilig reports do not provide a further outline of the victims' backgrounds. The analysis of tweets to journalists shows that many different journalists, given their multiplicity of (social) identities, roles and positions, are confronted with various forms of online hate. However, we found no clear quantitative differences between groups – particularly in terms of gender – when it comes to how much hate they receive online.

It should be noted once again that the sources we studied all have limitations that make it impossible to obtain a comprehensive picture of the victims. There are, however, a number of studies into violence against journalists in the Netherlands that provide an insight into the victims. The literature study shows that there is little evidence that female journalists are more often victims of violence than



men. It does seem, however, that the form of violence they encounter differs from that experienced by men. International literature shows that women are more frequently confronted with sexual harassment and violence than men. A recent study among female journalists in the Netherlands (Bruijn & Bouwmeester, 2022) shows that men are relatively more exposed to face-to-face incidents, while women are more likely to experience online hate speech and threats on social media. Virtually no research is available on differentiation related to other background characteristics.

The PersVeilig reports and criminal cases that we studied do, however, provide a clear image of common types of journalists who report incidents of violence or aggression or press charges against the offenders. Both sources mainly involve photographers and cameramen/women who are confronted with spontaneous and sometimes impulsive, emotionally-charged expressions of violence. This relates not just to physical types of violence but also to verbal expressions in the form of (death) threats or aggression. The over-representation of photographers and camera(wo)men is in line with previous results of Van Hal and Klein Kranenburg (2021: 11). Nevertheless, the question is to what extent these expressions of violence reveal something about the state of the profession of journalism as such: after all, a parallel can be observed with other officials with a public task who are confronted with violence and aggression (Aarten et al., 2020). Abraham and Van Soomeren (2020) showed that special investigating officers (BOAs) who work in public spaces and on public transport are confronted significantly more often with threats/intimidation and physical aggression than other BOAs. In the case of journalists, it is also those who actually work on the streets – photojournalists, cameramen, reporters of demonstrations, etc. – who are confronted with threats, intimidation and physical assault. This may partly be related to their activities as journalists but may also be illustrative of a crisis of authority and, in a broader sense, a diminishing trust in public institutions (Aarten et al., 2020). It is also likely that certain types of violence are in general reported less. For example, because the victim is afraid of the consequences of reporting the crime or because the journalist in question does not expect the police to take action.

#### *Four ideal/typical contexts in which violence occurs*

Because the complexity of the problem prevents us from providing a clear image, in Chapter 6 we typified the dynamics of violence against journalists by formulating four ideal-typical contexts in which violence takes place. In doing this, we have tried to do justice to the diversity of the phenomenon of violence against journalists but have also focused on specific patterns in the offenders, the victims, the context and the interaction between them. In the description of the ideal-types (which is particularly based on the interviews), aspects related to the offenders and victims that are underexposed in the official registrations also come to the fore.

- *112- and photojournalism*

The first ideal-typical context focuses on so-called 112 journalists and photojournalists. As mentioned above, these journalists are overrepresented in terms of registered violence. One important cause of this involves the context of the work: due to the nature of their activities, these journalists are more exposed than other journalists to the, sometimes strong, emotions of bystanders, residents or people who are directly involved in the incident they are reporting on. The presence of these journalists, often equipped with a (video) camera, causes some of these bystanders to react emotionally and indicate that they reject being recorded on camera by the journalists. They then try to prevent this by threatening violence or physical manifestations of violence.

- *Reporting on demonstrations or (sports) events*

In the second ideal-typical context that we have distinguished, we see that journalists who report on (sports) events or demonstrations are frequently confronted with violence. We note that the presence of a large crowd alone can be perceived as threatening by journalists, but we also come across examples of journalists being pelted with stones, fireworks or other objects or being physically attacked or chased. One of the main motives for this behaviour is that people do not want to be photographed or filmed, but in particular cases we also see that journalists are subjected to violent treatment because they are regarded as an extension of the government. Based on this research, nothing meaningful can be said about the individual backgrounds of the offenders of this violence but it does give us information about the group to which they belong. At sporting events, the offenders mainly involve groups of supporters or related groups, but the demonstrators are a new phenomenon that seems to have started with the corona crisis. Following various protests against the corona policy, the farmers' protests erupted in the Netherlands. During the corona pandemic, that also resulted in an increasing focus on this type of violence against journalists in media reports.

- *Online violence on social media*

Unlike the first two contexts, the third context does not involve physical or verbal expressions of violence but more online manifestations of violence in the form of hate speech or, in some cases, threats. This seems to be mainly aimed at influencers and columnists – that is, journalists who explicitly express their views in the media about certain social topics. It is clear that the online expressions of aggression or hatred seem to be aimed at journalists of various backgrounds and cannot only be attributed to people who are described by some as 'wappies' (conspiracy theorists) or 'fascists' and by others as 'woke'. Journalists themselves interpret this online hate as an expression of broader social discontent, something that seems to be channelled through the anonymity of the internet and the accessibility of platforms such as Twitter. However, based on this study it is not possible to determine from whom the online hate originates. Nor is it always clear whether online hate can also be classified as violence or threats within the scope of criminal law, which could be why such cases appear less often in the PersVeilig reports and criminal cases that we studied. By extension, journalists do not all problematise online hate in the same way. At the same time, many journalists said during the conversations that the hateful online climate does get 'under their skin' and can also incite social tensions.

- *Crime journalism*

The last ideal-typical context in this study relates to crime reporters. Violence and threats in this context figure very rarely in the criminal cases and PersVeilig reports. However, several prominent crime reporters in the Netherlands have encountered this and it is something they often speak openly about. The interviews show that for crime reporters (the threat of) this type of violence is also a (significant) part of their work that they do not speak publicly about. The murder of crime reporter Peter R. de Vries has attracted plenty of journalistic attention, although several respondents in this study do not necessarily attribute the motives behind the murder to his journalistic activities. Although it is not always clear who is behind a specific threat to a crime reporter and this information is not made public in the interest of the police investigation, the direction of the threat is clear: the criminal underworld and in particular the protagonists in the writings of the crime reporters. By threatening violence, they either try to prevent certain information from being made public or they express their

explicit dissatisfaction with the appearance of certain publications. The violence threatened against crime reporters is generally more extreme and different to the violence in the other ideal-typical contexts. This also means that the measures that these journalists (are forced to) take are different and some of them even need temporary or permanent protection.

The four contexts we described are illustrative of the fact that violence against journalists has different types of offenders and victims who are confronted with different types of violence, in varying degrees, also against the background of broader social developments related to trust in public institutions and each other. This makes violence against journalists a complex and multi-faceted problem that requires a differentiated approach.

## 5 key findings

### **Finding 1. Violence against journalists is a diffuse problem**

There is a great deal of variation in the nature and extent of the violence, as well as in the way it is experienced by journalists. Certainly not all journalists experience problematic aggression or violence during their work. Depending on the source used, different facets of the problem become visible.

### **Finding 2. Violence against journalists is not an isolated problem but part of broader social problems.**

Many journalists (even those who experience little or no violence themselves) experience a broader hostile climate towards journalists and regard this as a problem. Violence against journalists cannot be properly interpreted without placing it within the broader social context in which the work of journalism takes place. The violence cannot be viewed separately from violence against other figures of authority and people with a public task.

### **Finding 3. More attention has been paid to the problem of violence against journalists in recent years**

There is a clear increase in media attention for violence against journalists and growing social awareness of the problem. The profession itself is playing an important agenda-setting role in this.

### **Finding 4. Violence is unevenly distributed and context-dependent**

Violence is not evenly distributed among journalists: some journalists experience it more regularly and in a more extreme form than others. In addition, the form and degree of violence are specific to a particular context. We have identified four different contexts in which violence often occurs: 112 and photo journalism, reporting of demonstrations and (sports) events, online on social media and in the context of crime journalism. The degree to which journalists feel safe or unsafe greatly depends on their personal experiences and visions.

### **Finding 5. Violence is situationally determined and is often a manifestation of intense emotion**

Violence against journalists often involves incidental, impulsive expressions of emotion rather than rational, calculated acts. Whether a situation gets out of hand and whether emotion result in aggression or even physical violence against a journalist depends on the circumstances. If a motive can be identified, it usually seems to be due to dissatisfaction about (possible) publication and/or intending to prevent publication.

### 3. Policy interventions and recommendations

The third research question that was central to this study was: Which policy interventions could be effective in reducing or combatting violence against journalists and to what extent could it be useful to extend the community service ban in this context?

In Chapter 7, we describe the findings of our study into the policy context and measures in the Netherlands and three other European countries. To this end, we conducted a study of policy documents and literature. In addition to the Netherlands, we focused on Norway because this country has the highest score in the Reporters Without Borders ranking in terms of press freedom and the safety of journalists (RSF, n.d.). We also included France and Germany in the analysis because they were recently lower in this ranking than they had been (26 and 16 respectively in 2022) and many incidents were reported from those countries according to MMF (Media Freedom Rapid Response, 2021). As mainland Western European EU countries, these two countries are very comparable to the Netherlands. In Chapter 7, we also discussed how the 28 journalists experience the existing policy and describe their views on it, as well as their ideas for additional measures. In the final chapter, Chapter 8, we made a number of policy recommendations based on our empirical chapters and the findings in Chapter 7.

Below we discuss the existing measures, as well as possible new measures and/or aspects that require attention when measures are being taken. It is relevant to note that we are not the first researchers to deal with this subject and that various European and national organisations have already made the necessary recommendations to tackle violence against journalists. Many of the points of focus that we mention are in line with the points that have already been mentioned by others, although our emphasis sometimes varies.

#### *Existing policy interventions and their implementation in practice*

When answering the question of which policy interventions could be effective, it is first useful to reflect on the existing policy interventions and how they work out in practice.

If we consider the range of measures that are being taken in the Netherlands to combat violence against journalists, we can see that a relatively large number of measures are already in force in the Netherlands. At least compared to Norway, France and Germany. Particularly in the context of the PersVeilig public-private partnership (in which the Dutch Association of Journalists (NVJ), the Dutch Association of Chief Editors (NGH), the Police and the Public Prosecution Service (OM) are taking part), many concrete initiatives are being taken that are not being taken in other countries. For example, the registration through PersVeilig of reports of incidents involving violence is exceptional, as is the wide range of training courses and financial support for taking security measures.

Since the establishment of PersVeilig there also seems to be a greater focus on violence against journalists. The topic clearly is placed on the social agenda. This has also made journalists much more aware of the existence of violence and the possibilities to do something about it, both preventively and repressively.

Our research shows that the journalists we spoke to are generally satisfied with the PersVeilig initiative and the agreements made in this regard. They appreciate the sense of urgency demonstrated by the agreements. However, the study also reveals that there are limitations when it comes to implementation of the policy (such as the knowledge of the agreements, the urgency given to them,

treatment by the police and the demand for a 200% higher sentence by the Public Prosecution Service). The first recommendation is therefore to ensure that this policy, which journalists are enthusiastic about on paper, is also implemented in practice. Awareness of the policy among lower officials is certainly a point of focus and there is particularly room for improvement in the way journalists are treated by the police.

#### *Community service ban*

We asked respondents whether increasing sentences even more and/or a community service ban (as suggested in a motion in the framework of the legislative proposal to extend the community service ban)<sup>3</sup> would be of additional value in their opinion. Except for a handful of journalists, no journalists see the benefit of a community service ban. The main reason for this is that journalists do not believe it has any deterrent value. There are also journalists who feel that in some cases community service may indeed be the appropriate punishment for particular violent crimes. A few also said that the existing policy should first be put into practice. So as far as the journalists are concerned, there seems to be little desire for (additional) measures with regard to sentencing. Based on our finding that violence against journalists often takes place impulsively and is not calculated, we too believe that measures relating to sentencing have little added value in combatting violence.

#### *Other policies*

In Chapter 8, we discussed a number of focus points for policy measures and the recommendations that can be made. The main focus point is to combat the hostile climate that many journalists are experiencing in their work. To help with this, it is important to focus on the role that politics can play in inciting violence. The role of journalists themselves also deserves attention. Finally, measures can be taken to increase the media literacy of citizens.

A second focus point involves (further) mapping out the problem. Positive steps are being taken in this direction, but it is important that existing initiatives for research and registration are continued and that data collection always occurs in the same way. To get a complete picture – as our report shows – it is also important to identify unrecorded violence and include it in the problem analysis.

Another aspect that deserves continued attention is the safety of journalists during protests and demonstrations. Here, improving the relationship between the police and journalists is a focus point. Existing initiatives that target the resilience of journalists should be continued and further implemented.

Now that a great deal of journalism is taking place online, online safety is also something that needs to be focused on. It must be ensured that the private data of journalists can be protected and that journalists are trained in how to use and deal with social media. Following steps taken in France and Germany, online platforms in the Netherlands could also be held more responsible for removing inadmissible content aimed at journalists, amongst others. It would also be beneficial to encourage desirable behaviour online and discourage undesirable behaviour – for example, with behavioural guidelines.

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<sup>3</sup> Given that this bill was rejected by the Dutch Upper Chamber on 18 October 2022 after a roll-call vote (Report EK 2022/2023, no. 4, item 11), the debate about the possible extension of the community service ban to journalists is also less pressing.

Freelancers also appear to be a vulnerable group. Besides the existing measures (such as the Flexible Protection Package for Freelancers), additional initiatives could be considered to protect this group. In addition, it would be good to investigate the extent to which other groups are disproportionately affected by (certain types of) violence. There are still too few – and no unequivocal – findings on this subject in the literature. More data could provide support for more targeted measures.

### Five key policy recommendations

#### **Policy recommendation 1. Better compliance with existing policies**

The PersVeilig Protocol, which is based on a high priority among the police and the Public Prosecution Service for the investigation and prosecution of people suspected of aggression and violence against journalists, should be complied with more strictly by both the police and the Public Prosecution Service. The main focus in this regard is increasing awareness of the agreements among lower-ranking civil servants. In addition, the PersVeilig initiative must be provided with sufficient funding and further cooperation on a permanent basis.

#### **Policy recommendation 2. A community service ban is not an adequate measure to effectively combat violence**

Few journalists see the added value of a community service ban in the event of violence against journalists or of other measures related to sentencing. These types of measures are also not consistent with the often impulsive and ill-considered nature of the violence.

#### **Policy recommendation 3. Focus on stimulating media literacy**

Further initiatives can be introduced to stimulate media literacy in order to reverse the sometimes hostile climate against journalists. Existing initiatives (at schools, etc.) can be expanded. It is also important to discuss the role that journalists themselves can play in the prevalence and prevention of violence and aggression.

#### **Policy recommendation 4. Constant attention should be paid to mapping out violence against journalists by means of registration and research**

When doing this, it is particularly important to examine in more detail which groups of journalists are most affected by the violence (and whether they are vulnerable groups). Measures can be used more specifically, depending on whether the violence is directed at female journalists, journalists with a minority background or freelancers, for example.

#### **Policy recommendation 5. Hold online platforms responsible for stimulating desirable online behaviour and removing unacceptable content**

It must be possible for online content to be removed more quickly and more easily. There should also be a greater focus on stimulating transparency and desirable online behaviour and on drawing up and enforcing online rules of conduct.