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Cahier 2023-18

The effectiveness of the Top600 programme

*A comparative study of recidivism
among prolific offenders*

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Cahier

De reeks Cahier omvat de rapporten van onderzoek dat door en in opdracht van het Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum is verricht. Opname in de reeks betekent niet dat de inhoud van de rapporten het standpunt van de Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid weergeeft.

Summary

The effectiveness of the Top600 programme

A comparative study of recidivism among prolific offenders

Introduction

The Amsterdam-Amstelland region's Top600 programme is one of the better-known local strategies for tackling offenders who persistently commit so-called 'high-impact crimes' (HICs). The programme focuses on the following HICs: domestic burglary, mugging, robbery, assault, manslaughter and murder. A relatively small group of offenders has been found to be responsible for thousands of HICs in Amsterdam. These prolific offenders are characterized by multiple and complex problems, which in addition to criminal behaviour include, for instance, mental health problems, substance abuse, (mild) intellectual disabilities, debts and/or homelessness. Reducing recidivism among this group of prolific offenders was the reason for launching the Top600 programme in 2011. The objective of the Top600 programme is threefold: 1) reducing the recidivism of individuals in the Top600 programme (by means of long-term or permanent behavioural change), 2) improving the future prospects of individuals in the Top600 programme (in such areas as housing, school/work, income and healthcare), and 3) preventing the siblings (and children) of individuals in the Top600 programme from entering the Top600 programme. On the one hand the programme focuses on punishment and on providing a fast, effective response to criminality, while on the other it aims to offer guidance and assistance. The Top600 programme is overseen by the City of Amsterdam's Action Centre for Security and Care (AcVZ) and implemented in collaboration with more than 40 organisations. The programme subjects around 600 offenders to a personalised and integrated approach. Every individual on the Top600 list is assigned a liaison officer ('regisseur'). In consultation with all the organisations involved with the individual in question, the liaison officer draws up a joint action plan and coordinates its implementation. Fourteen key partner organisations (including the AcVZ, the police, the probation service and the local community health service) provide liaison officers for the programme.

It is as yet unclear whether the Top600 programme has been effective in reducing recidivism and so achieving one of its objectives. The AcVZ monitors the programme's results on an annual basis, but it cannot be determined from the method used whether the programme has led to a reduction in recidivism. Although this monitoring does demonstrate that Top600 individuals reoffend less frequently once they have entered the programme than they did previously, the lack of a control group not subject to the programme means that that reduction cannot be ascribed with any certainty to the programme specifically, rather than to other factors such as the increasing age of its subjects or the fact that criminal behaviour has seen a general decrease throughout the Netherlands for some years now.

The present study looks at the extent to which the Top600 programme has been effective in reducing recidivism and so achieving one of its objectives. A quasi-experimental design was applied for this purpose, whereby the recidivism of

individuals who entered the Top600 between October 2012 and October 2015 (the intervention group) was compared with the recidivism of comparable individuals who, during the same period, fell within the Top600 Programme Covenant but marginally outside the Top600 list or whose programme never started (the control group). In addition to the quantitative findings, and to help with their interpretation, Top600 liaison officers were asked in focus groups about their experiences with the programme. The aim of this exercise was to gain additional insight into why and for whom the programme is and is not effective when it comes to reducing recidivism. Since it relates to recidivism, the focus groups also addressed the programme's second objective: improving future prospects.

The following research questions were central to the present study.

- 1 What are the backgrounds of the individuals making up the intervention and control groups?
 - a What are the offender and criminal history characteristics of the individuals in the Top600 group, and how do these compare to those of the individuals in the control group?
 - b What are the Top600 programme characteristics of the individuals in the Top600 group, such as the year of entering the programme and its duration?
- 2 What are the recidivism rates among the intervention group?
 - a What has been the recidivism rate among the Top600 group since the programme commenced?
 - b What are the recidivism rates during and after the programme among Top600 individuals discharged from the programme?
- 3 To what extent has the Top600 programme been effective in reducing recidivism when compared with 'treatment as usual'?
- 4 What are the liaison officers' experiences with the Top600 programme?

The present study forms part of a multi-year research programme dealing with recidivism among perpetrators of HICs and the effectiveness of the related interventions. The study was undertaken by the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Dutch Ministry of Justice, with the assistance of the AcVZ. The WODC performed the analyses and wrote the report, and also bears ultimate responsibility for its contents. The AcVZ supplied data for the intervention and control groups, as well as Top600-related documents (including internal material), and it helped organise and conduct the focus groups. It also checked the report for factual inaccuracies.

Method: quantitative component

The criteria for inclusion in and discharge from the Top600 programme are described in the Top600 Programme Covenant. In order to be placed on the Top600 list, an individual must meet a number of police and Public Prosecution Service criteria. Most of these concern the number of arrests or criminal prosecutions in the last two or five years – in particular, those related to HICs. When the programme was first set up in 2011, it was found that almost 1,200 people fell within the broad criteria originally drawn up. To limit the list to the most serious offenders, the criteria were therefore narrowed. Those on the Top600 list are thus individuals who meet the narrower

criteria. A person is discharged from the programme once they no longer meet the criteria, also taking into account any time spent in prison.

Five types of data were used in the quantitative component of our research. The first is the Top600 and Top400 lists drawn up in April and October each year, for the years up to and including 2020. These sources were used to define the intervention group and to rule certain individuals out of the control group. People who had been included in the Top400 list were ruled out of the control group, because that programme – which focuses on a younger and less seriously criminal group – is comparable in structure to the Top600 programme. The second and third sources are regional and national police databases. Drawing on regional data for 2007-2015, for the present study the police checked which individuals met the broad police criteria in the Top600 Covenant in the period between October 2012 and October 2015. This group became the core of the control group. The national police data used concerns all arrests in the Netherlands of individuals included in the intervention and control groups in the period 2012-2020. This data was used to calculate the correlation between arrests and criminal prosecutions in these two groups. The fourth source was data from the Research and Policy Database for Judicial Documentation (OBJD). That is a pseudonymised version of the Criminal Records System (JDS), a statutory registration system established for the purpose of scientific research. For the present study, OBJD data from 2007-2020 was used to further define the control group (i.e. which individuals met the narrowed Public Prosecution Service criteria), to compare the intervention and control groups in terms of various offender and criminal history characteristics and to calculate recidivism rates (up to and including 2020) and the correlation between arrests and criminal prosecutions in these two groups. The final data source was the time-in-prison-table (TIP table). Based on information from the Custodial Institutions Agency (DJI), this contains all the periods of imprisonment served by each Top600 offender. For this study, periods up to and including 2020 were considered. Information from the TIP table was used to correct recidivism data for time spent in prison – periods during which it is virtually impossible for a person to reoffend.

The final intervention group consisted of 516 people first included in the Top600 list between October 2012 and October 2015 (seven lists were compiled during this period), and whose guidance under the programme commenced and then continued for at least six months. As such, these individuals met the narrowed police and Public Prosecution Service criteria. The control group consisted of 709 individuals who, on the same seven reference dates as the intervention group, fell within the Top600 Covenant but either fell just short of inclusion on the actual Top600 list or the programme ultimately did not start. In the former subgroup, the individuals selected did not meet all of the Top600 criteria: they did meet the broad police criteria and narrowed Public Prosecution Service criteria, but not the narrowed police criteria. In the latter subgroup, the individuals selected did meet all the criteria (both the narrowed police criteria and the narrowed Public Prosecution Service criteria) and so were included in the Top600 list, but in the end the actual programme never started.

In the quantitative part of the study, the backgrounds and recidivism rates of the intervention and control groups were first charted by means of descriptive statistics (research questions 1 and 2). Next, the effectiveness of the Top600 programme was investigated by comparing the recidivism rates for the intervention and control groups (research question 3). Because the Top600 programme is not imposed arbitrarily, from the outset there is a difference between the offenders in the intervention group and those in the control group. In order to compare recidivism between the groups

nonetheless, and thereby to be able to make claims about the programme's effectiveness with regard to recidivism, two complementary methodologies were applied. Firstly, a strict matching procedure (a combination of coarsened exact matching and propensity score matching) was used to make the groups comparable in terms of the offender and criminal history characteristics measured at the time of entry or on the reference date. Secondly, difference-in-difference regression analysis was applied to the difference in the frequency of recidivism between the matched intervention and control groups, taking into account any unmeasured differences between the groups. Recidivism was operationalised as 'a new offence which leads to a criminal case in the Netherlands'. Criminal cases were defined as cases which have ended in a conviction in court or have been settled by the Public Prosecution Service (including discretionary dismissals, but excluding acquittals, discharges from prosecution, dismissals by reason of unlikelihood of conviction and other decisions based on technicalities), as well as cases which have not yet been (irrevocably) settled. The period of recidivism was calculated from the date on which the Top600 programme commenced, not the date on which it ended, because individuals are discharged from the programme if they reoffend less. Both the prevalence of recidivism (the percentage of individuals who reoffend) and its frequency (the number of times that individuals reoffend) were analysed for the study. Recidivism data was corrected for the time individuals spent in prison, because the chance of recidivism occurring during imprisonment is substantially lower (the incapacitation effect). Research question 3 (the effectiveness of the Top600 programme) focused exclusively on the frequency of recidivism, because the programme's objective is the reduction of recidivism. It would obviously be desirable for individuals in the Top600 to stop reoffending completely, but given that the programme is aimed at prolific offenders with complex issues, this is not viewed as a realistic objective. This study analysed two forms of recidivism: general recidivism (a new criminal case due to any offence) and HIC recidivism (a new criminal case due to an HIC offence).

Method: qualitative component

The qualitative data consists of the results of two focus groups held with seven and eight Top600 programme liaison officers, respectively. At the time these meetings were being prepared (autumn 2021), there were 94 liaison officers working in the programme. For the most part, those invited were selected by means of stratified sampling. First, liaison officers with some work experience as liaison officer were selected, having supervised a minimum of seven Top600 individuals. Out of this group, the six officers who were already working in the period from which the intervention group was selected (between October 2012 and October 2015) were invited to participate in the focus groups. The remaining 44 officers were then divided into four groups, based on the number of liaison officers per key partner organisation, and a random sample was taken from each of those groups. In this way, a greater number of participants would be selected from key partners supplying a lot of liaison officers, while at the same time, for the sake of diversity, participants from organisations supplying fewer officers would also be selected. The two focus groups took place in February 2022 at the AcVZ in Amsterdam. Both were led by a WODC researcher and an AcVZ employee, and each lasted around two hours. With the consent of the participants, audio recordings were made. Prior to the meetings, a topic list was drawn up.

The average age of the fifteen participating liaison officers was 42 years. Six were male, nine were female. At the time of the focus groups, they had each worked an average of five years as a liaison officer (range 2-11 years). They had guided between 13 and 50 Top600 individuals including those currently under their guidance. Three liaison officers worked for the AcVZ, three for Inforsa (an affiliate of the Dutch addiction probation service, SVG), two each for the Salvation Army and the Amsterdam community health service and one each for the probation service, the William Schrikker Foundation (for youth protection and probation), the Youth Protection Service for the Amsterdam Region, the police and the Public Prosecution Service.

To better understand the participants' experiences as Top600 liaison officers, the transcribed focus group discussions were coded and analysed (research question 4) using both codes drawn up in advance (a priori coding) and ones generated on the basis of the data (in vivo coding). A WODC researcher and an AcVZ employee independently coded both transcripts, then compared and analysed their outcomes in order to reach a consensus on the manner of coding. The analysis involved checking which codes appeared most frequently in the data, plus an assessment of the differences between the liaison officers in their experiences of the Top600 programme.

Results: backgrounds and recidivism records of the Top600 and control groups

The intervention (Top600) group consisted almost entirely of males (98%). Their mean age at the start of the programme was 24 years, and 20% were still minors at that point. On average, they were 16 years old when prosecuted for the first time. At the start of the programme, they had an average of twelve previous criminal cases to their name, including three HICs. In the four years immediately prior to intake, the average number of criminal cases (including HICs) increased annually. Typically, then, these individuals were at the peak of their criminal activity upon entering the Top600 programme. They had spent an average of 1.5 years in prison prior to intake.

In terms of background, the control group differed considerably from the intervention group. For example, its average age was considerably higher, due primarily to including a lower percentage of minors. Although individuals in the control group generally had a more extensive criminal history, they had been less criminally active in the years immediately preceding the reference date: the average annual number of criminal cases (including HICs) involving individuals in the control group decreased in the four years prior to the reference date, while the opposite was the case for the intervention group. This meant that a matching procedure was required to make the groups comparable in terms of the background characteristics measured.

At the end of the research period on 31 December 2020, 25% of the intervention group remained on or had been reincluded in the Top600 list. Around 20% had featured on the list more than once (returnees). At the end of 2020, the average time a person had spent in the programme was three years and four months.

The descriptive recidivism results show that almost every individual in the intervention group faced new criminal cases following their intake into the programme (prevalence of recidivism), although the average number of cases per year decreased during the

programme (frequency of recidivism). This includes correction for time spent in prison. To gain further insight into general recidivism patterns during and after the programme, the recidivism data of discharged Top600 individuals was analysed further. Three mutually exclusive groups of individuals discharged from the programme can be distinguished here: returnees, quick dischargees (the 50% of dischargees who left most quickly) and slow dischargees (the 50% who left most slowly). The general frequency of recidivism declined in all three groups during the programme, but then rose again after the programme ended – either immediately or after four years. In the case of slow dischargees, this increase was immediate and this is also the group in which recidivism increased most sharply. With both quick and slow dischargees, the frequency of HIC recidivism was very low following discharge. Returnees' frequency of recidivism was somewhat higher, but that is not surprising given that these were people re-entering the programme.

Results: programme effectiveness in terms of recidivism

Taking into account correction for time spent in prison, the recidivism analysis showed that individuals from both the matched intervention group and the matched control group reoffended less frequently following intake into the Top600 programme (or the reference date) than they did prior to intake (or the reference date), but that this decline in recidivism was less accentuated in the matched intervention group. As for the frequency of HIC recidivism, this was the same before and after intake in the case of the matched intervention group, but declined in the matched control group. Both differences are statistically significant. In terms of both general and HIC recidivism, the matched intervention group performed worse than the matched control group. These findings run counter to the Top600 programme's objective and the expectation formulated in Chapter 2 of this report: we did not find that the Top600 programme led to a reduction in recidivism (including HIC recidivism) in the matched intervention (Top600) group compared to the matched control group.

Our finding that general recidivism declined in the matched intervention group following intake into the programme is in line with the findings of the AcVZ's annual Top600 monitor. The current study also shows, however, that a similar – and, in fact, even greater – reduction occurred in the matched control group. The decrease in recidivism does not, therefore, appear to be a consequence of the Top600 programme, as the AcVZ claims, but is more likely to be due to other factors, such as the fact that Top600 individuals are older by definition following their intake into the programme than they were prior to entering, or that the Netherlands has been seeing a general reduction in criminality for a number of years now. In the current study, general recidivism among Top600 individuals decreased less than is reported in the Top600 monitor (20% compared with 31-49%). This is explained primarily by the fact that the present study includes a correction for time spent in prison, which the monitor does not: the decrease in recidivism reported there is thus attributable in part to an incapacitation effect. Likewise, our finding that the frequency of HIC recidivism in the matched intervention group was unchanged before and after intake differs from Top600 monitor, which found a decrease in the HIC recidivism. Again, this discrepancy is explained in part by our correction for time spent in prison. But a second factor is also at play here, namely the fact that the matched intervention group in the present study is a less serious group in terms of recidivism risk and committing HICs than the full intervention group.

Nonetheless, there is a limitation to the current recidivism findings. That is the fact that it proved impossible to find a satisfactorily comparable control group for the full intervention group. For the present study we opted for a strict matching procedure, as a result of which suitable matches in the control group were found for only 43% of the intervention group. The matched intervention group largely matched the full intervention group in terms of background characteristics, although individuals in the former were on average older, had fewer HIC cases in the two years before entering the programme and had spent more time in prison prior to intake than individuals in the full intervention group. Moreover, the matched intervention group demonstrated a lower frequency of recidivism (including HICs) following intake. It may therefore be concluded that the matched intervention group is a less serious group in terms of recidivism risk and committing HICs. It could be that the programme had a different effect on the (more serious) non-matched group. This makes it difficult to generalise about the effectiveness of the Top600 programme in terms of recidivism. It should be noted, however, that, in the context of robustness analyses in the present study, other, less strict forms of matching were also attempted. These enabled up to 90% of the intervention group to be matched with a control group - where the matched intervention and control groups were less comparable and/or individuals in the control group were used as matches more than once - and the analyses led to the same recidivism findings in all cases. The findings thus appear not to depend on the matching choices made, which indicates that the results are robust.

Results: liaison officers' programme experiences

Mixed experiences with the objective 'reduce recidivism'

The liaison officers participating in the focus groups had different experiences with and ideas about the extent to which the Top600 programme contributes to reducing criminal behaviour. On the one hand, some felt that it could help in this respect because the guidance and assistance provided may aid participants in changing their behaviour or because those individuals are monitored closely during the programme and as a result commit fewer offences. The first of these mechanisms, providing guidance and assistance, is in line with theories of resocialisation and presumes a permanent reduction in recidivism which also continues after the programme has ended. The second mechanism, monitoring, aligns with the theory of deterrence and is aimed at achieving a temporary reduction in recidivism, i.e. for as long as the individual is on the Top600 list. By contrast, other liaison officers doubted whether the programme is effective in reducing recidivism. Their view was that Top600 individuals are persistent offenders whose ways are hard to change. Some Top600 individuals have been on the Top600 list since the programme's inception in 2011, and a number of liaison officers had the impression that some of 'their' Top600 individuals had actually begun to reoffend more frequently – being arrested frequently wouldn't deter these Top600 individuals. This difference in perspective appears on the one hand to result from their being assigned various types of Top600 individuals, depending on the organisation they work for, and on the other hand because liaison officers differ from one another and have varying experiences.

The liaison officers referred to a number of factors which influence the likelihood of a reduction in recidivism. These include the personal motivation of the individual in question, his or her capabilities (which may be limited by a mild intellectual disability, mental health issues and/or addiction), contact with a criminally active family and/or

friends, and age and the concomitant responsibilities. Also mentioned were the individual's future prospects. Having a home, a legitimate income or a worthwhile daily activity, for instance, may give them the feeling that they have something to lose and can create the calm and space needed to effect behavioural change. For the liaison officers, moreover, being able to hold out the prospect of something positive (a home or income, perhaps, or even a bicycle or participation in a music project) puts an important source of motivation at their disposal – it provides them with a bargaining chip. Lastly, the officers state that having a legal framework in place (such as conditions of probation or a court-imposed mandate) helps reduce recidivism. All of these factors are in line with existing theories and previous studies.

Reduced opportunities to achieve the objective 'improve future prospects' and offer bargaining chips

The liaison officers indicated that, in the initial phase of the Top600 programme, they had good opportunities to offer bargaining chips and to hold out better future prospects for the individuals under their guidance. Over time, however, that has become increasingly difficult. This is particularly true for the areas of housing and healthcare, as there are a major shortage of suitable accommodation and long waiting lists for health interventions. A number of liaison officers also experienced increasing bureaucracy when requesting project finance from the AcVZ, to acquire items like a bicycle or a mattress. Sometimes they encountered barriers to exploring 'alternative' ways of delivering better prospects or exchanging bargaining chips. Due to these limitations, they find it difficult to improve the future prospects of Top600 individuals and to get and keep them motivated.

The liaison officers acknowledged that these reduced opportunities are largely a national issue, which the City of Amsterdam and the AcVZ can do little to alter. Nonetheless, the officers did see some opportunities for improvement on the part of both these local actors. For example, buying in more supported housing places, finding a solution to problems associated with the financing of supported housing places outside Amsterdam, facilitating better and quicker access to AcVZ project finance and guaranteeing night-shelter places for homeless Top600 individuals. They also suggested devising more attractive opportunities and projects in line with the interests and/or talents of Top600 individuals, which would act a positive stimulus and make them more likely to engage with the programme.

The obstacles described have also been identified in previous research, Top600 documents and other sources. For example, prior research has already found that Top600/Top400 liaison officers believe that there is not always enough room for 'out-of-the-box' thinking and consider the process of applying for project finance too bureaucratic. As for the problems in housing and healthcare, they are generally accepted to be national issues – as was also acknowledged by the AcVZ in its recently published multi-year plan for 2023-2026. On average, 22% of Top600 individuals are homeless. Yet permanent housing is an important precondition for further progress towards better prospects. According to the AcVZ, the problems in housing and healthcare form a major obstacle undermining the effectiveness of the Top600 programme. The voices critical of the application process for project finance are familiar to the AcVZ and the number of applications have declined considerably since the project finance commenced in 2017. Lastly, several inspirational and motivational interventions are deployed as part of the Top600 programme, although perhaps not as widely as they could be. It is possible the liaison officers are not sufficiently familiar

with these options and/or that they require more or different possibilities and interventions.

Personal guidance, collaboration and prioritisation are added values of the Top600 programme, which still require attention

The liaison officers specified three successful elements of the Top600 programme. First and foremost, the personal guidance of Top600 individuals by a regular, engaged liaison officer is seen as one of the programme's main benefits. Most officers try to maintain contact with their assigned individuals, to motivate and guide them and to forge a bond with them. They do not always succeed, however. Not all Top600 individuals want contact, and some liaison officers indicated that they do not pursue contact if they find that there are already too many parties involved with the person concerned or if another intervention or programme is already under way.

The second successful element according to the liaison officers is the collaboration established between network partners, with the liaison officers functioning as linchpins. Due to the Top600 programme, lines of communication are now shorter, more information is shared and there is greater coordination between the network partners. At the same time, liaison officers experience several hurdles in this area. For example, collaboration outside the Amsterdam region was more difficult due to unfamiliarity with the Top600 programme in other parts of the country. In addition, achieving collaboration depends on the liaison officer's personal network.

The third successful element mentioned by the liaison officers was the prioritisation of the Top600 programme among key partners, which speeds up cases and opens doors. For example, the cases of Top600 individuals are picked up more quickly and effectively by the City of Amsterdam's Department of Work, Participation and Income. Similarly, there is a 'fast lane' at the Public Prosecution Service for appeals involving Top600 individuals, and when probation is imposed Top600 individuals are assigned a probation officer more quickly. Furthermore, there is more room for exceptions. That said, according to the liaison officers the programme's prioritisation has declined over time. They say that network partners now put less effort into the Top600 programme, and have reduced the commitment and capacity they devote to it. The officers see three potential reasons for this: a police capacity problem (specifically, in the teams responsible for the integrated personal approach, or IPGA), the Covid-19 pandemic (which, among other things, led to backlogs at the Public Prosecution Service) and the fact that the novel aspect of the Top600 programme has now worn off. The officers recommend that the IPGA be provided with additional funding. This is because, if liaison officers want to focus on a punishment-led approach to a Top600 individual under their guidance, to a great extent they are dependent for this on the IPGA's capacity to monitor the person in question. In its multi-year plan, the AcVZ also refers to limited police capacity and Public Prosecution Service backlogs as a consequence of the pandemic, and mentions that these have consequences for the programme's effectiveness.

Criteria for intake and discharge are too rigid and restricted

The liaison officers consider the manner used to decide who enters and who is discharged from the Top600 programme – exclusively on the basis of police and Public Prosecution Service records – too rigid and restricted. In practice, the officers encounter situations in which they believe that: (1) a particular individual should not

(or should no longer) be on the Top600 list, even though that person meets the selection criteria; (2) a particular individual should enter the programme, even though that person does not fully meet the criteria; or (3) a particular individual should not be discharged, even though that person no longer meets the criteria. In these situations, they say that it is virtually impossible for them as liaison officers to even discuss deviating from the selection criteria, let alone to actually succeeding in doing so. They consider it a loss that this is not possible.

Regarding to the first situation above, several subgroups were mentioned as potentially unsuitable for inclusion. For example, people who have been declared 'undesirable aliens' (and must therefore leave the country), people under hospital orders or serving lengthy custodial sentences, people with whom many parties are already involved or who are involved in another programme or intervention (such as a custodial order for repeat offenders or a programme based in another city, because the subject lives there) and people whose criminal behaviour is linked to complex mental health issues and who have a long history of contact with social and clinical services. Another subgroup raised in this context was persistent Top600 individuals: people who have been on the Top600 list since its inception in 2011. Some liaison officers consider the programme unsuitable for this subgroup, arguing that you cannot call it a success if someone remains on the list for ten years. But others feel that it may still be appropriate, since the liaison officer is often the only stable factor in dealing with these offenders and he or she is also aware of what else has been tried with them. When it comes to antisocial persistent Top600 individuals, this latter group of liaison officers believes that the subject's designated liaison officer should come from the Public Prosecution Service so that full priority can be given to prosecuting them for the crimes they commit. The AcVZ also states in its multi-year plan that there is little hope of improving the prospects of persistent Top600 individuals, individuals under hospital orders or serving lengthy custodial sentences and persons declared 'undesirable aliens'.

The liaison officers indicated a desire to play a greater role in consultations on who enters and is discharged from the programme, and provided two suggestions for improvement. First, they proposed that Top600 individuals who have been on the list for a lengthy period should undergo a standard evaluation after, say, five years, with discharge as one of the potential outcomes. Secondly, the liaison officers would like to be involved in any consultations when one of the three situations described above occurs. They believe that their professional opinions should be considered in such circumstances. It should be noted, though, that some of these wishes appear to be at odds with the AcVZ's guiding principle that the Top600 selection criteria should be objective and testable, so that the grounds on which any individual has entered or left the programme can be verified and explained.

Top600 programme targets a complex group

Another point raised by the liaison officers is that the programme's current objectives are perhaps too ambitious for the Top600 target group (or in any case, a section thereof). Consistent with previous research, the officers indicated that the target group is one that has severe problems in many areas of life. The capabilities of Top600 individuals are often limited by mild intellectual disabilities and/or mental health issues. This raises the question of how much can be expected from them. The liaison officers emphasize the importance of acknowledging that a large proportion of the Top600 group cannot keep up with society. Moreover, a substantial part of the target

group lacks motivation. All this means that a large proportion of the Top600 group is more or less unreceptive to interventions of this kind.

Theoretical perspectives

Although the Top600 programme involves a tailored approach to each individual, at heart it combines two main strategies which each link with a different theoretical perspective: 1) guidance, motivation and improving future prospects (rehabilitation) and 2) a fast, effective response, with quick, strict and consistent punishment (deterrence). The overarching principle is that both main strategies be applied in tandem to each Top600 individual. What emerged from the focus groups, however, is that in practice liaison officers sometimes deploy one strategy to the total exclusion of the other.

On the one hand, if there is engagement and a measure of goodwill on the part of the person concerned, their liaison officer will deploy motivational interviewing, offer bargaining chips and try to improve future prospects – all in the hope that this will lead to a reduction in recidivism. This approach is in line with theories aimed at rehabilitation, which assume that recidivism declines because problems are addressed and changes are set in motion. In this particular setting, however, it appears to be complicated by two factors. One is the existence of a less receptive Top600 target group, the other the limited opportunities when it comes to improving future prospects and offering bargaining chips, especially in the areas of housing and healthcare. This despite permanent housing, in particular, being an important precondition for further progress towards better prospects.

On the other hand, there is a focus on a fast, effective response and punishment within the Top600 programme, working closely with the police and the Public Prosecution Service. If individuals lack any will or motivation to engage with the Top600 programme and/or refuse even to enter into contact with the liaison officer, all efforts of the liaison officer focus on ensuring a fast, effective response and punishment. This strategy is consistent with the theory of deterrence, which presumes that guaranteed, harsh and quick punishment dissuades people from engaging in criminal behaviour. It does, however, have some limitations. First and foremost, this strategy aims to reduce recidivism only temporarily – in practice, for as long as the subject remains on the Top600 list. Secondly, police capacity issues in recent years have made it increasingly difficult to respond quickly and effectively to criminality, and to punish it accordingly. Thirdly, it is questionable whether the target group is actually deterred by this strategy. The liaison officers had varying views and experiences in this respect: some had the impression that 'their' Top600 individuals commit fewer offences because they know that they are being monitored, whereas others believe that 'their' Top600 individuals are unaffected by frequent arrest and imprisonment. It may be that some Top600 individuals are utterly impervious to punishment, but it is also possible the some simply consider the response from the criminal justice system too 'soft' to inconvenience them. In 2015, for instance, three-quarters of arrests of Top600 individuals culminated in no further action being taken.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the present study found no indications that the Top600 programme reduces (HIC) recidivism among individuals in the HIC target group. Our quantitative

research was unable to establish that the programme has resulted in less (HIC) recidivism. For 43% of the intervention (Top600) group, a satisfactorily comparable control group was found. The general frequency of recidivism decreased over time in the matched intervention and control groups alike, but this effect was weaker in the matched intervention group than in the matched control group. The frequency of HIC recidivism was unchanged in the matched intervention group before and after programme intake, while it declined in the matched control group. Both differences are statistically significant. The Top600 programme thus appears not to reduce recidivism, with the results even suggesting an adverse effect. That said, the matched intervention group was a less serious group in terms of recidivism risk and committing HICs than the full intervention group. Because the matched intervention group is a selective section of the full intervention group in terms of some background characteristics, it is difficult to generalise about the effectiveness of the Top600 programme in terms of recidivism. It should be noted, however, that in the present study other, less strict forms of matching were also attempted and that the analyses led in all cases to the same results in respect of recidivism. Furthermore, it emerged from the qualitative research that not all liaison officers are convinced that the Top600 programme reduces recidivism.

The results indicate that, in terms of recidivism, the Top600 programme does not work, and it may even have adverse effects. The qualitative research reveals two possible explanations for the absence of a recidivism-reducing effect. The first is that achieving behavioural change in Top600 individuals is difficult, because it is a complex group with severe problems in many areas of life and in many cases with limited capabilities and motivation. Perhaps the objective of reducing recidivism is simply too ambitious for this group, or for a considerable section of it. If so, it may still be the case that the programme does mitigate recidivism among a certain subgroup, such as those individuals who do have sufficient capabilities and who can be motivated to change their lives. A second possible explanation is that that part of the programme aimed at rehabilitation is not being executed as well as intended. For example, liaison officers have increasingly limited possibilities to hold out better future prospects and offer bargaining chips, especially in the areas of housing and healthcare. As a result, it has become more difficult to motivate individuals in the Top600 to change their behaviour. Moreover, the stable home situation on which better prospects and behavioural change can be based is often lacking. How much scope is available in practice for the motivation and personal development of Top600 individuals is also questionable. Although the programme is intended to focus on this and most liaison officers endorse its importance, there is not always contact between liaison officers and their Top600 individuals, and the deployment of available interventions in this area appears limited.

It is striking that the quantitative results indicate that the Top600 programme may have adverse effects. One potential explanation for this is that the results are obscured by the surveillance paradox: although crime-reduction interventions are obviously intended to curtail criminality, the amount of criminality registered may in fact increase because the individuals subject to such interventions are also those most likely to come under the scrutiny of the police and prosecutors. Several factors do indeed seem to indicate greater evidence of a surveillance paradox when it comes to the intervention group than with regard to the control group. For instance, the Top600 programme intends to focus specifically on quick, effective responses and strict, consistent punishment. The liaison officers in the focus groups also indicated that Top600 individuals are under the close scrutiny of police and

prosecutors, and officers appear to assume that inclusion in the programme increases a person's chance of being arrested, prosecuted and convicted, and well as accelerating that process. Other factors, however, argue against the existence of a greater surveillance paradox for the intervention group than for the control group. For example, the matched control group also consists of very criminally active offenders who are undoubtedly on the police's radar. Moreover, the policy of fast, effective response may have a deterrent effect within the Top600 programme, and the more effectively the programme deters, the less plausible the surveillance paradox is. Lastly, there are questions to be asked about the supposed greater chance of arrest, prosecution and conviction given that the police have a capacity problem and that most arrests of Top600 individuals do not appear to be followed up.

The extent to which there is a greater surveillance paradox for the intervention group than for the control group cannot be determined from the current study, but some additional analyses have been carried out which may provide an indication. Individuals in the matched intervention group did not appear to have been prosecuted and punished more quickly than those in the control group. Therefore, the results of the additional analyses do not support the surveillance paradox hypothesis. However, these analyses only applied to the speed with which individuals were punished, not to how great the chance of punishment was.

Methodological reflection

Some caveats need to be made about the methods used in the present study. For the interpretation of the findings, it is therefore important to reflect on the consequences of those methods

A first point of methodological reflection concerns the choice of a quasi-experimental design to study the effectiveness of the Top600 programme. Although this is a strong research design (Maryland Scientific Methods Scale level 4), the best way to determine effects is still a randomised controlled trial (RCT) with offenders randomly assigned for intervention. In quasi-experimental studies, the risk always exists that biases will creep into the estimation of effects because of unmeasured differences between the intervention and control group. In the present study, an attempt has been made to overcome this by combining a strict matching procedure with a difference-in-difference analysis. Moreover, the groups in the present study have been matched in terms of characteristics which are in line with the Top600 selection criteria, i.e. the extent of criminal activity.

A second point of methodological reflection is the extent to which the recidivism findings are generalisable. One disadvantage of any matching procedure is that it can easily restrict the population about which a statement can be made. This was also the case in the present study, in which a satisfactory control group could only be found for 43% of the intervention group. The matched intervention group was a less serious group in terms of recidivism risk and committing HICs than the full intervention group. This makes it difficult to generalise about the effectiveness of the Top600 programme in terms of recidivism. It should be noted, however, that other, less strict forms of matching were also attempted in the present study and always led to the same results in respect of recidivism. Another pertinent point when it comes to generalisability is that the intervention group consisted only of individuals who entered the Top600 programme in the period 2012-2015. However, given that the selection criteria for the

HIC target group and the programme itself have not really changed since it commenced 2011, there is no direct reason to think that the results do not also apply to (less serious) HIC target group who entered the programme after 2015.

A third point is that recidivism was measured based on judicial records. This means that the present study only considered offences which came to the attention of the Public Prosecution Service, whereas in fact by no means all offences are detected and prosecuted. We can therefore say with some confidence that the actual extent of recidivism has been underestimated. It may be that, because of the surveillance paradox, this underestimation is a greater factor in the control group than in the intervention group.

A second point of methodological reflection is the value of the information obtained from the focus groups. By their nature, focus groups reveal the opinions and experiences of only a limited number of participants. For the present study, a total of fifteen liaison officers (16% of the total number) took part in two separate focus groups. The results of these two focus groups were comparable: the same themes and points of view came up in both meetings. Moreover, various opinions and experiences were shared widely by the participating liaison officers and numerous points raised bore out the findings of previous research, Top600 documents and other sources. To increase representativity and hence generalisability, it was decided in this study to use a random sample of liaison officers, taking into account the organisations they work for. Nevertheless, it emerged from the focus groups that officers from organisations with a focus on healthcare were overrepresented by comparison with those employed by organisations focused on enforcement or other activities. This was because a relatively high number of healthcare organisations provide liaison officers. It is possible that, because of this distribution, certain themes received relatively more or less attention in the focus groups. That said, because almost all the organisations for which liaison officers work were represented, we are confident that the themes they deem most important were discussed.

Our final point for methodological reflection concerns the target group and the period discussed in the focus groups. The present study focuses on the Top600 programme for perpetrators of HICs, but since 2019 the programme has had two target groups: perpetrators of HICs and perpetrators of drugs-related and violent (DRV) offences linked to the trade in narcotics. Moreover, the quantitative component of this study covered the period 2012-2020. To align the focus groups with this timing, it was first decided to invite all six liaison officers who had been part of the programme since its inception. In addition, at the start of the focus group meetings the participants were told that the present study was about perpetrators of HICs and asked to provide details of their experiences as liaison officers with those individuals, not with DRV perpetrators. In practice, a lot was said in the meetings – which were held in February 2022 – about the Top600 programme in recent years. However, comparisons were also made with its initial period – and at the end of 2020 still 25% of the intervention group from the quantitative component remained on or had returned to the Top600 list. Because the meetings did also include much discussion about more recent events, however, we cannot rule the possibility that experiences with DRV perpetrators were also raised. Even so, the DRV group was and remains significantly smaller than the HIC group.

Recommendations

Recommendations for future research

More independent research into the effectiveness of the Top600 programme is required in order to determine whether or not it is successful in achieving its objectives. The programme has existed for more than ten years, but at the time of writing ours remains the only effect study into any of its three objectives.

First, it is recommended that follow-up research be conducted into the programme's effect on recidivism. Ideally, this would feature an even stronger research design, pay attention to other measures of recidivism, study the programme's effect on different subgroups and examine the impact of specific actions and interventions. Replication is an important part of the scientific method. Moreover, the current study lacked a satisfactorily comparable control group for the full intervention group. This limitation could be overcome in any follow-up research by carrying out a RCT – which seems quite possible in the case of the Top600 programme. Any follow-up research should also pay attention to the surveillance paradox, for example, by measuring recidivism using self-report. Moreover, future research on recidivism could be extended to include consideration of the seriousness of the offences in question. Although achieving less serious recidivism is not an objective of the Top600 programme, it emerged from the focus groups that liaison officers would consider Top600 individuals committing less serious offences an indication of success. Finally, it is recommended to investigate whether the Top600 programme is more or less effective in terms of recidivism for certain subgroups or when applying certain interventions.

Second, it is recommended to investigate the programme's effect with regard to its other two objectives. When it comes to the first of these, improving the future prospects of Top600 individuals, we again recommend conducting a RCT so that there is a satisfactorily comparable control group for the full Top600 group. Among other things, this would allow for systematic measurement of the living conditions of both groups upon intake (or a reference start date), during the programme and upon discharge from the programme (or a reference end date). Its final objective, preventing the younger siblings (and children) of Top600 individuals from entering the Top600 themselves, also deserves attention in future research. Here, we also recommend looking into the proportionality and legitimacy of targeting siblings, with an eye for possible risks and potentially negative side-effects, since concerns have been expressed in this regard.

Recommendations for policy and practice

The present study gives rise to several recommendations for policy and practice. First, we recommend that the Top600 programme not be further expanded to target other groups until it has been proven that it is actually effective – and if so, for whom. In recent years the programme has begun to focus on other offender groups. This expansion is a consequence of the assumption that the programme has been effective, since the AcVZ's Top600 monitor reports a reduction in recidivism among the Top600 individuals. The present study, however, demonstrates that recidivism has also declined in the control group. Therefore, the reduction in recidivism seems not a result of the programme. As long as the effectiveness of the programme remains unproven, restraint as regards expansion would be prudent.

Second, it is recommended that the living conditions and problems of Top600 individuals be registered periodically and more systematically (upon intake, during the programme and following discharge). The same should also apply to the actions and interventions deployed as part of the programme. Better registration would serve three purposes: (1) records can be used for scientific research into the programme; (2) it allows the AcVZ to monitor the programme more easily, to learn from any problems found and to fine-tune the programme accordingly; and (3) up-to-date Top600 files aid liaison officers (including new ones) in implementing the programme.

Third, we recommend reconsidering the recidivism objective of the Top600 programme. Although additional research into this factor is desirable, no indications have been found in the present study that the programme leads to any reduction in recidivism among Top600 individuals. It is questionable whether the objective of reducing recidivism (through long-term behavioural change) is suited to the complex target group and in line with the programme's policy of fast, effective response (which is more attuned to a temporary reduction in recidivism through deterrence and incapacitation).

Fourth, the City of Amsterdam and the AcVZ should increase liaison officers' scope to hold out better future prospects and offer bargaining chips by creating more possibilities in this area, by more actively communicating the existing possibilities and by lowering the barriers encountered here. According to the liaison officers, opportunities in this regard have diminished in recent years, particularly when it comes to housing and healthcare. As a result, the Top600 programme is not being executed as well as intended. This has repercussions for two objectives of the programme: improving future prospects and reducing recidivism. Moreover, for liaison officers bargaining chips are an important means of motivating Top600 individuals. To implement the programme effectively, then, it is important that – despite the national problems in the housing and healthcare sectors – the liaison officers have more possibilities, and also feel that they do.

Fifth, we advise that more capacity becomes available to police teams to implement the integrated personal approach (IPGA) for Top600 individuals. The Top600 programme envisions a fast, effective response to criminal activity, and its quick, strict and consistent punishment. Both liaison officers and the AcVZ state that the IPGA is essential to this, because it allows them to observe and monitor Top600 individuals. If no solution is found for the limited police capacity in this area, an essential component of the programme cannot be implemented. If Amsterdam wishes to maintain this programme as originally intended, it has to ensure that all the necessary resources and capacity for its full implementation are in place.

Sixth, it is recommended that, in consultation with the liaison officers, the AcVZ consider potential exclusion criteria for the programme. After all, there appear to be several subgroups for whom it has no added value. They include so-called 'undesirable aliens' and people under hospital orders or serving lengthy custodial sentences, as well as people living in other cities and subject to programmes based there. In particular, the monitoring to which individuals under hospital orders or serving lengthy custodial sentences are presently subjected as part of the Top600 programme seems unjustified. By formulating exclusion criteria for such subgroups, the programme's selection criteria remain objective and testable, so that the grounds on which individuals enter and leave the programme can be verified and explained.

Lastly, we recommend that, as standard practice, individuals who have been in the programme for five or more years (thus including the persistent Top600 individuals) be evaluated on an annual basis and that discharge be one of the options considered. It is legitimate to ask how long you should continue to pursue a (expensive) programme if it is not achieving the desired outcome. Any evaluation should critically assess whether the actual effect is proportionate to the means deployed. It should also be possible to express this situation as a discharge criterion. Even if that is not particularly stringent, it is not difficult to explain and justify individuals being discharged from the programme after five years if the efforts made have failed to produce satisfactory results.

In conclusion

The conclusion of current study is that we have found no indications that the Top600 programme reduces (HIC) recidivism among individuals in the HIC target group. The programme's guiding principle – a personalised and integrated approach to prolific offenders in which all the organisations involved collaborate to implement a joint action plan combining punishment with guidance and assistance – is one that appeals to the imagination. Liaison officers believe that there is added value in the personal guidance they provide in a regular and engaged manner, the collaboration between network partners and the prioritisation of the programme, which speeds up cases and opens doors. The present study, however, has found no supporting evidence that this reduces recidivism in the HIC target group. There are two possible explanations for this. First, the Top600 individuals form a complex target group, with severe problems in many areas of life and in many cases with limited capabilities and motivation. Perhaps the objective of reducing recidivism is simply too ambitious for this group, or for a considerable section of it. If so, it may still be the case that the programme does mitigate recidivism among a certain subgroup. Second, that part of the programme aimed at rehabilitation appears not to be executed as well as had been intended. For example, liaison officers are increasingly limited in the future prospects and bargaining chips they can offer, especially in the areas of housing and healthcare. As a result, it has become more difficult to motivate individuals in the Top600 to change their behaviour, and the stable home situation on which better prospects and behavioural change can be based is often lacking. The amount of room available in practice for the motivation and personal development of Top600 individuals is also questionable.

More independent research into the effectiveness of the Top600 programme is required in order to determine whether or not it is successful in achieving its objectives. The current study found no indications that the Top600 programme reduces (HIC) recidivism, but this is just one study and, moreover, it is unclear whether the other two objectives are achieved: improving future prospects and preventing the entry into the Top600 programme of the siblings (and children) of Top600 individuals. The programme has existed for more than ten years, yet this remains the only effect study into any of its three objectives even though the programme consumes a lot of capacity and money, and subjects Top600 individuals (and their siblings) to an intensive programme which can have a major impact on their lives.

Lastly, it is important that there be room for reflection. It has been noted in several publications that the City of Amsterdam appears to have a quasi-religious belief in the Top600 programme, as a result of which internal criticism has been lacking and there

is little room for criticism from outside. That politicians and those implementing the Top600 programme hope that it works is understandable, but it is important that no-one be blind to criticism or when scientific research cannot find empirical support for the programme's effectiveness.

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