



Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en
Datacentrum

Cahier 2024-12

Incidents and Crimes by Residents of COA and Emergency Reception Centres 2017-2023

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S.M. Noyon
V.M. Barsegyan
M.E. Vink
T.P.N. Pluymaekers

Cahier

De reeks Cahier omvat de rapporten van onderzoek dat door en in opdracht van het Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Datacentrum 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

Incidents and Crimes by Residents of COA and Emergency Reception Centres 2017-2023

A great deal of attention has been given to nuisance behaviour of asylum migrants – in public and political debate as well as within organisations dedicated to migrant issues, the police and the Netherlands Public Prosecution Service (Openbaar Ministerie). Although previous editions of the incident and crime report have repeatedly demonstrated that the group showing nuisance behaviour is only a tiny minority of the tens of thousands of asylum migrants who are given reception each year in the Netherlands, the behaviour of this small group has an outsized impact. Nuisance behaviour can have a damaging effect on the daily life of other residents of reception centres, the working conditions of Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) staff, the daily life of local inhabitants of cities and towns where reception centres are located, and ultimately public support for the reception of asylum seekers in the Netherlands. In order to devise effective policy capable of combatting nuisance behaviour, and in order to support constructive public debates about it in all fairness, factual information is essential. The incident and crime report contributes to this goal.

Since 2022, the WODC (Research and Data Centre) is responsible for drafting the incident and crime report as part of a long-term research programme. Within this programme, the WODC also carries out in-depth studies whose purpose is to provide an interpretation of findings of the annual reports. Recently, the second in-depth study was published, which examined the background characteristics of those involved in incidents and suspected of crimes. Future in-depth studies may be dedicated to policy-relevant issues, such as the significance of the features of individual reception centres, but also to specific target groups, such as unaccompanied minors or asylum-seekers who leave reception centres in the Netherlands without a known destination. Another possible topic is a comparative study of suspects among the COA population and suspects among the general Dutch population.

In the current report, data concerning the registration of suspects and the legal resolution of cases are pegged against data drawn from the general Dutch population. It must be observed, however, that this was only done to put them in some sort of context and not for comparison purposes. These would not, after all, be true comparisons because we did not control for the demographic composition of the populations being compared. Previous studies have demonstrated that differences in crime rates between asylum migrants and other suspects in the Netherlands disappear when background characteristics such as age and sex are taken into account. Each year, we retrospectively recalculate the statistics for all years in the reporting period. For the current report, we recalculated the statistics based on data we received at the beginning of 2024. We do this so that, within each report, it is possible to compare the totals and percentages for the different years because they have all been defined the same way and calculated based on the same kind of data. Because the data used for the report originate from living systems, which may also undergo changes retrospectively, the figures concerning previous reporting years may be different than reported in those editions. For the current edition of the report it should also be noted that we were able to draw a more complete picture of incidents than

previous editions because of the inclusion of data about incidents for which the location remained unknown, and because definitions were altered in some places. We implemented this retroactively for all the reporting years. These differences are explained in the notes to the relevant tables and figures as well as in the methodological appendix to the report.

Target group

In the period from 2017 through 2023, a total of 270,000 unique individual foreign nationals were resident in a COA or emergency reception centre. Since 2018, the average daily occupancy has only risen from 20,000 in 2018 to 53,600 in 2023. This increase in occupancy has been caused by a combination of the increased inflow of new asylum seekers, the increased waiting times for application processing by the Immigration and Naturalisation Service, and a stagnation in the exit of holders of resident permits due to shortages in the housing market. As a result, COA residents are often counted in the statistics for multiple years.

Nearly 75% of the target group are males. Young adults aged 18-29 formed the largest age group in 2023 (34%). In second place is a large group of minors, which accounted for 26% of the target group in 2023. This category includes both unaccompanied minors and children with their families.

The residents of COA or emergency reception centres during the reporting period held nationalities from over 170 different countries of origin. In 2023, the most common nationalities were Syrian, Turkish, Yemeni, Eritrean, and Somalian. The nationalities with the largest share of occupancy change over the years. Nationalities in the top 15 in 2023 that were not yet among the predominant nationalities in 2017 are Yemenis, Nigerians, Pakistanis, and Colombians. A large percentage (39%) of the residents of COA or emergency reception centres in 2023 held the Syrian nationality, which makes it the most common nationality. The Syrian nationality remains far and away the largest national group over the entire reporting period.

In 2023, a total of 98,370 individual foreign nationals resided for a period of time at a COA or emergency reception centre. A small proportion of them (9% and 3% respectively) were participants in an incident involving aggression or violence or suspected of a crime in that year.

Incidents involving the residents of COA and emergency reception centres

Never before was the occupancy of COA and emergency reception centres as high as it was during the reporting period. We saw that the average daily occupancy in 2023 rose by 28% in relation to the year before. Along with this rise in occupancy, we also observed a 43% increase in the number of incidents. In total, COA registered 13,395 incidents involving verbal suicide threats, self-destructive actions, and physical, verbal and non-verbal aggression and violence in 2023. This marks a rise in relation to the year before when just 9,370 incidents were registered. Nonetheless, also in 2023, only a small minority of the target group was involved in aggression or violence incidents (9%).

The majority of residents of COA and emergency reception centres involved in an incident in 2023 were living at an asylum seekers' centre. Almost a third of the incidents involved residents of locations for unaccompanied minors, while this type of reception accounted for only 6% of average occupancy in 2023. The high number of incidents that were registered in asylum seekers' centres may be explained by the fact that the majority of people live in this type of locations (thus a statistical explanation). The large proportion of incidents registered in locations for unaccompanied minors and locations with increased supervision – specifically referred to respectively as extra guidance and supervision locations (EBTLs) and enforcement and supervision locations (HTLs) – may possibly be explained by the higher degree of control and supervision at these locations (thus a registration effect), as well as by the fact that asylum seekers who cause public disorder reside there (in the case of EBTLs and HTLs). In 2023, the COA imposed 8,815 measures on foreign nationals due to incidents included in the current report, an increase of 53% over 2022. This can partially be explained by the increase in average occupancy and the number of incidents in 2023. The number of measures imposed increased much more sharply, however, across the entire reporting period than did the number of registered incidents. The number of measures imposed has nearly quadrupled since 2017, while the number of registered incidents in the same period was only 2.8 times higher. This is an indication that the way COA staff members deal with incidents has changed in recent years.

Of the 8,965 individual residents of COA or emergency reception centres who were involved in an incident (excluding verbal suicide threats and self-destructive actions) in 2023, the vast majority were male (88%) and the largest proportion under the age of 30 (64%). In 2023, Syrians were involved in 37% of all incidents; Syrians also formed the largest nationality within the target group in 2023 at 39%. On the other hand, we saw that only 9% of all Syrian residents of COA and emergency reception centres were involved in an incident in 2023. A relatively high number of incidents involved people of the following nationalities: Algerians (31% of Algerian residents of COA and emergency reception centres), Tunisians (30%), Moroccans (27%), Libyans (21%), Gambians (19%), and Nigerians (14%). This may correlate with an overrepresentation of men and young adults among these groups. It should be mentioned, however, that for these nationalities too the majority of residents were not involved in an incident in 2023.

Crimes of which residents of COA and emergency reception centres are suspected

In 2023, the police reported 6,800 registrations of suspects who at the time the crime was committed were resident at a COA or emergency reception location. This represents an increase of 14% over 2022. As previously stated, average daily occupancy increased by 28% between 2022 and 2023.

Residents of COA and emergency reception centres were primarily suspected of property crimes: in 2023, 74% of the suspects registered by the police involved this type of offence. This percentage is higher than for the general Dutch population in 2022¹ (32%). At the same time, the percentage of registered suspects involved in violent crimes among residents of COA and emergency reception centres is relatively

¹ The figures regarding offences in 2023 will be published later this year in a new edition of *Criminality and Law Enforcement*. For this reason, we used the data for criminal offences in 2022 as published in the 2023 edition (Moolenaar, D. E. G., Choenni, R., & Van den Braak, S. W. (2023). *Criminaliteit en rechtshandhaving 2022*. WODC)

low (12% as opposed to 18% for the Dutch population). Here we would like to note that there are many demographic differences between these groups (for instance with regards to age structure and socio-economic background) that could explain why the percentages are so different.

In total, the police registered 3,100 individual criminal suspects within the target group in 2023. This corresponds to 3.1% of the unique residents of COA and emergency reception locations in 2023. This share is reasonably constant across the whole reporting period. Of all unique criminal suspects in the Netherlands in 2022, 1.5% were residents of a COA or emergency reception centre. The structure of the group of suspects is similar to the group of those involved in incidents described above: the majority of criminal suspects were residents of asylum seekers' centres, while also residents of unaccompanied minor locations and locations with increased supervision occur relatively frequently, although the residents of this type of reception centre only form a small percentage of average occupancies. Criminal suspects are predominantly male (96%) and young adults: 57% of suspected COA and emergency reception centre residents are between the ages of 18 and 29. Nationalities with relatively high percentages of criminal suspects are Algerian (44% of Algerian residents of COA and emergency reception centres were criminal suspects in 2023), Moroccan (30%), and Tunisian (29%). As demonstrated by the in-depth study published earlier this year, differences between nationalities in the percentages of suspect registrations can partially be explained by asylum application acceptance rates. Another possible explanation may be the composition of these national groups, certainly given the fact that males and young adults are overrepresented among criminal suspects in the Dutch population at large.

With regard to the findings concerning the processing of criminal offences by the Public Prosecution Service and the judiciary, we looked at the number of cases processed per year. This may also include cases that were committed in prior years. With this method of calculation, however, the number of suspects registered by the police in a given year, the number of criminal cases resolved by the Public Prosecution Service in the same year, and the number of criminal cases handled by the judiciary do not coincide. Such a discrepancy is unavoidable in this kind of annual monitoring report, given the time it takes the Public Prosecution Service and judiciary to process cases.

In 2023, the Public Prosecution Service handled 4,300 cases in which the suspect was a resident at a COA or emergency reception centre at the time the crime was committed. In the majority of these cases (74%), the decision was made to issue a summons to appear in court; this figure is relatively high in comparison with the general Dutch population, of which only 44% of cases were brought before the court in 2022.

In 2023, the court issued a judgment in 2,700 cases in which the suspect was a resident at a COA or emergency reception location at the time the crime was committed. In comparison with the Dutch population in general, suspects who were COA or emergency reception centre residents were found guilty slightly more frequently (96% in 2023 versus 91% of the Dutch population in 2022). With regard to sentencing, however, courts handed down a prison sentence or detention for young offenders much more frequently to residents of COA and emergency reception centres (86% in 2023) than to members of the Dutch population (39% in 2022). It is possible that the aforementioned differences in legal resolution – both by the Public Prosecution Service and the courts – have to do with the nature of the crimes committed, or

perhaps the consideration of how successfully the enforcement of an alternative sentence or measure could be carried out.

Suggestions for future editions and additional studies

The findings presented in this report provide several working hypotheses for more in-depth investigations. Topics that could come under consideration in future include:

- The difference in the type of crimes that are committed by the general Dutch population and by residents of COA and emergency reception centres, and the degree to which this explains the difference in legal resolution.
- Other explanations for the difference in legal resolution between suspects resident at COA and emergency reception locations and suspects among the general Dutch population, e.g. factors relating to the methods used by the police and other parties within the criminal law system.
- Foreign nationals charged with crimes who are not resident at a COA location at the time the crime was committed (migrants who leave reception centres only to return some time later).
- The influence of triggers on nuisance behaviour (e.g. the rejection of an asylum application).
- Features of the specific reception centre in relation to the number of incidents and crimes and their nature (e.g. a centre's average level of occupancy; the living conditions or subgroup formation among large numbers of people of the same background, sex or residence status).
- The connection between the type of asylum procedure (accelerated, general or extended procedure) that the suspect or person involved underwent and the number of incidents or crimes.
- Victimhood (and willingness to report to the police) among residents and staff at reception centres.

Data-related and methodological choices

In order to interpret the findings properly, it is important to note that the data used in composing this report were drawn from operational registration systems that are dedicated to the primary process and not intended for research purposes. This must be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

The data for calculations drawn from the registration systems of the various organisations involved were requested by WODC and linked at the individual level. All totals in the tables and the figures are rounded off to the nearest multiple of five in order to reduce the possibility of this information being used to identify specific individuals. The totals in the text are rounded off to the nearest thousand, hundred or multiple of ten, depending on how large the number is. For calculating percentages, the totals from the tables were always used and not those from the text. The exact rounding method is explained along with other methodological considerations in the methodological appendix to this report.

Het Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Datacentrum (WODC), Kennisinstituut voor de rechtsstaat, is een onafhankelijk kennisinstituut dat valt onder het ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid. Het WODC draagt bij aan behoud en verbetering van de rechtsstaat via het (laten) uitvoeren van kwalitatief hoog wetenschappelijk onderzoek. En door het aanbieden van gevraagde en ongevraagde kennis, verbeterpunten en (waar mogelijk) denkrichtingen.

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