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Hot victims or hot shifts?

Research on Repeat Victimization among Police Officers, Law Enforcement Officers, and Firefighters

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Summary

Research on repeat victimisation among police officers, law enforcement officers, and firefighters

Practitioners of high-risk professions such as police officers, municipal law enforcement officers in domain 1, and firefighters encounter aggression and violence from citizens too frequently. This includes verbal abuse, intimidation, threats, and physical violence. These experiences can have severe consequences for the victims and undermine public service. Previous research shows that the number of incidents of aggression and violence has remained stable over recent years, but that victimisation is unevenly distributed across the workforce. This means that a small group of the total workforce is more frequently victimised than others. These repeat victimisation experiences are burdensome for the individual well-being of employees and the functioning of these professions.

To effectively address this issue, it is assumed logical to target measures specifically at this group of repeat victims. Therefore, this research aims to provide insights into the extent of repeat victimisation among police officers, law enforcement officers in domain 1, and firefighters and its predictive indicators. With these insights a perspective on possible interventions and measures to reduce aggression and violence against these three professions can be developed.

The definition of repeat victimisation in this research:

The same individuals who, within a period of one year, are victimised more than once by (online) verbal and/or physical forms of aggression and violence while performing their duties.

To determine the extent of repeat victimisation and explore the explanatory hypotheses for repeat victimisation, this research involved a literature review, data analysis of police reports of victimisation, and interviews with team leaders and prevention and aftercare employees from the three professions. Subsequently, the explanatory hypotheses were tested and the extent and forms of repeat victimisation were further defined by employing a survey among police and law enforcement team leaders, conducting focus groups with experts, and analysing incident reports.

This research comes with various limitations. These include limited data collection among firefighters, no direct involvement of victims in this research, and the inability to make clear distinctions between the

different law enforcement domains¹ across methods. Additionally, it should be emphasised that an estimation method was used to determine the extent, and that the existing registrations of victimisation provide only a limited representation of reality due to underreporting.

Research outcomes

We present the outcomes of this study by responding to the research questions. In doing so, we address the four sub-themes: (1) insights from the literature, (2) extent and forms of repeat victimisation, (3) predictive indicators of repeat victimisation, and (4) recommendations to reduce repeat victimisation. The outcomes are based on the research methods mentioned above.

Insights from the literature

1. What theories and models offer tools to better understand the issue of repeat victimisation and reduce its likelihood?

Much is already known in the literature about victimisation of violence, repeat victimisation, and aggression and violence against public service employees. Based on existing insights, we arrived at a definition of repeat victimisation among high-risk occupations and a first inventory of possible risk indicators of repeat victimisation.

The literature on victimisation and theories on repeat victimisation in relation to property crimes and domestic violence was decisive in shaping the definition of repeat victimisation among high-risk professions. We employ a narrow definition of repeat victimisation, and speak of repeat victimisation when the same individuals are repeatedly victims of aggression and violence. We also included a time limit in our definition to express that repeat victimisation does not occur by chance but must have a pattern. This is similar to crime patterns like hot spots, hot times, and hot offenders. We used this definition to capture the extent and forms of repeat victimisation.

Based on theories of repeat victimisation, we applied the *flag* and *boost* approaches in this research. In line with the *flag approach*, we propose that practising a high-risk profession – such as law enforcement officers, firefighters, and police – inherently makes employees vulnerable to aggression and violence. According to the *boost approach*, there are then a number of additional risk factors that make the employee vulnerable to becoming a repeat victim of aggression and violence.

We used extensive literature on (practice based) studies on aggression and violence against public service employees, to identify possible risk factors for repeat victimisation. We distinguished between contextual

¹ In the Netherlands there are six domains, or types, of municipal law enforcement officers (*buitengewoon opsporingsambtenaren*). This research focuses on domain 1, which comprises of officers responsible for law enforcement in the public space. In some of data collection methods, such as the data extract of police reports, it was impossible to make distinctions between the six domains, wherefore all domains have been included.

factors such as organisational, functional, and situational factors, and individual factors such as working style and personal characteristics. These categories of risk factors formed the basis for gathering predictive indicators of repeat victimisation from practice.

Extent and forms of repeat victimisation

2. How many professionals, of each profession, are repeatedly victimised by aggression and violence?

Registration of (repeat) victimisation among the three professions is neither consistent nor complete, which makes it difficult to provide a precise response to this question. The only nationwide and uniform dataset that includes registration on all three professions is the national police system in which incidents and reports of violence and aggression are registered.² This data is, however, also prone to underreporting. In this research, we use report numbers as an indicator of the extent of (repeat) victimisation. Based on a data extraction from the national police system for the period 2018-2022, we conclude that repeat victimisation in absolute numbers most commonly occurs among police officers. Furthermore, for this period, the numbers indicate that among police officers there are more repeat victims than one-time victims. Firefighters hardly ever report victimisation of violence, and from what they do report it appears that repeat victimisation rarely occurs.

Based on reports of violence and our definition of repeat victimisation, in 2022 there were 803 repeat victims among police officers (compared to 515 one-time victims), 436 repeat victims among law enforcement officers (compared to 750 one-time victims), and 3 repeat victims among firefighters (compared to 14 one-time victims). When relating these numbers to the size of the workforce of these three professions, the numbers of reports indicate that the incidence rates of both the total number of victims and repeat victims are higher among law enforcement officers than police officers. Because willingness to report incidents of aggression and violence is limited among employees of the three professions, these numbers do not provide a complete picture.

To get a clearer picture, we employed an estimation method. First, we conducted a survey among 346 team leaders of police and law enforcement officers to determine the willingness to report incidents for each form of violence. Using these results, we calculated a correction factor. Based on this, we estimate that in 2022 1 out of 20 police officers became a victim of aggression and violence. We calculate that roughly 3% of police officers in operational service were repeat victims of aggression and violence (approximately 1,600 employees). Additionally, we estimate that 2% of police officers in operational service were one-time victims of aggression and violence (approximately 1,000 employees). Among law enforcement officers, we estimate that in 2022 1 out of 8 employees became a victim of aggression and violence. We calculate that about 5% of law enforcement officers were repeat victims (approximately 1,200 employees), and about 8% were one-time victims of aggression and violence (approximately 1,900 employees).

² This concerns the *Basisvoorziening Handhaving (BVH)*.

Predictive indicators of repeat victimisation

3. What predictive indicators can be associated with repeat victimisation?

- **What are the personal characteristics of repeat victims?**
- **What organisational characteristics can be associated with repeat victims have?**
- **What situational characteristics play a role in repeat victimisation?**

Research participants most frequently attribute repeat victimisation to society's hardening. However, it is difficult to describe and prove its connection to repeat victimisation. Additionally, research participants among the three professions mainly point to certain job-related indicators that increase risk. For instance, employees who work certain shifts and are frequently deployed to handle emergency calls or work during peak times, like New Year's Eve, encounter aggression and violence more often. Employees who work these high-risk shifts also encounter high-risk groups such as protestors, football fans, and nightclub patrons more frequently and easily. Certain employees are more likely to be assigned to these high-risk shifts, which increases the likelihood that they will experience violence and aggression more often—a phenomenon known as "hot victims."

Report registrations and interviews indicate that at the individual level, the age between 20 and 35 can be associated with repeat victimisation. Additionally, working styles, such as assertiveness or a firm attitude, are associated with repeat victimisation according to interview and survey respondents. However, these indications are not strong enough to be considered predictive indicators of repeat victimisation. This is because auto selection appears to be a factor at play with regards to these high-risk job types. This results in an indirect, rather than a direct, relation. For example, young and assertive employees are generally more likely to take on high-risk shifts and are therefore at greater risk of repeat victimisation. Age and working styles are thus only intermediary variables of repeat victimisation. There are more young employees among repeat victims, but this does not mean that being assertive and young makes one more vulnerable to violence and aggression.

4. How do the predictive indicators of repeat victimisation compare to those of the total group of victims of aggression and violence among the three professions?

The predictive indicators of repeat victimisation among police, law enforcement officers, and firefighters are mainly contextual and job-related, such as the type of shift. These predictive indicators can also be associated with one-time victimisation and align with what is already known in the literature. Some personal characteristics of repeat victims, such as age and working style, differ from one-time victims. However, as previously mentioned, it seems that there is only a loose relation because these characteristics influence why certain employees accept high-risk shifts and not necessarily whether or not they experience aggression and violence.

5. Are there differences in predictive indicators between professions?

The predictive indicators of repeat victimisation for police and law enforcement officers are more or less the same, with a few slight differences. Research participants from both professions cite societal developments and the type of shift as the main explanations and predictive indicators. For the police, the explanation leans more towards the increased demand for police enforcement during social unrest such as demonstrations, protests, and riots. For law enforcement officers, it is more related to the poor image of the profession, combined with the expansion of duties and responsibilities, many of which are unfamiliar to the general public and therefore met with resistance. The general lack of capacity and the shortened police academy duration are cited by research participants among police as additional explanations for high-risk shifts. This is because it results in a smaller group of more experienced employees sharing the burden of high-risk shifts. Law enforcement officers focus more on individual working styles as an explanation for repeat victimisation, possibly because this profession is relatively new and developing.

This research was unable to confirm patterns of repeat victimisation among firefighters. Repeat victimisation seems to appear sporadically. The predictive indicators appear limited to the type of shift, including the hot times, such as New Year's Eve, and hot spots, such as certain urban neighbourhoods.

Recommendations to reduce repeat victimisation

6. What measures exist among the three professions to reduce the likelihood of repeat victimisation?

Various measures are already being taken among the three professions to prevent and mitigate aggression and violence against employees. Policies, safety protocols, and awareness-raising campaigns are a few examples of the preventative measures in place.

On top of that, employees, particularly in the police force and law enforcement officers, are trained in (communication) skills, de-escalation techniques, and dealing with aggression and violence. In terms of aftercare, all three professions are generally positive about the various forms of peer support available. Additionally, the three professions offer various options for reporting, registering, and filing complaints about incidents, but the willingness to do so is limited. Police officers are provided with extensive support in reporting and registering incidents.

The aforementioned measures are primarily aimed at preventing and mitigating victimisation in general. According to prevention and aftercare workers interviewed for this study, current policies do not distinguish between repeat and one-time victims in treatment. Separate policies focusing on the specific indicators of repeat victimisation do not seem logical, as the risk factors that can predict the incidence of repeat victimisation are nearly identical to those that can predict one-time victimisation.

However, there still is a need for tailored prevention and aftercare measures for repeat victims (see question 8).

7. What considerations should be made when selecting different types of measures to reduce repeat victimisation, given the nature and extent of repeat victimisation, and the investments this involves?

This research found few indications for personal characteristics as predictive indicators of repeat victimisation. Contextual factors, in particular, appear to be of influence. Therefore, measures targeting the predictive individual indicators of hot victims do not seem logical. Based on the findings of this research, we conclude that a comprehensive understanding of the nature and extent of repeat victimisation is lacking, that the phenomenon hot victims is closely linked to hot shifts, and that the three professions prefer customised solutions for repeat victims. Based on these considerations, we offer three recommendations (see question 8).

8. What recommendations can be made for taking measures to reduce repeat victimisation (for each profession)?

Based on the research findings and suggestions from the field, we offer three recommendations to reduce repeat victimisation and improve prevention and aftercare:

- ① Ensure consistent victim registration and simplify the reporting and registration process, at least for law enforcement officers and firefighters. This can be achieved, for example, by developing reporting formats, creating accessible registration systems, enabling anonymous reporting, increasing assistance during the reporting process, encouraging the registration of online violence, and ensuring timely and adequate follow-up of reports and registration. Clear views on the scope and types of repeat victimisation, as well as creating suitable policies, are still lacking due to inconsistent victim registration and low reporting willingness.
- ② Create policies that account for potential social developments, such as the rise in protests and the violent confrontations that follow, as well as the risk factors associated with certain shifts – the so called hot shifts. This might involve training that is specifically tailored to the local environment and any (new) risk factors. Employees who frequently work these high-risk shifts require special consideration because contextual factors—particularly shift-related ones—seem to be indicative of repeat victimisation.
- ③ Strengthen the role of team leaders in caring for employees, particularly repeat victims. By increasing the role of team leaders in prevention and aftercare, the specific needs of employees can be addressed in an adequate manner. It also prevents victim blaming and increases the effectiveness of measures. Despite limited evidence for personal characteristics as predictive indicators in this research, the impact of victimisation can be severe, and therefore employees require individual care and attention to prevent or mitigate victimisation experiences. Research respondents from the field indicate that team leaders are most suited to take on this responsibility.

In conclusion

This research was initiated because there is a perception in the field that there are certain personal factors that make a small proportion of public service employees more likely to be victims of aggression and violence than others. Therefore, it seems useful to create specific (preventive) policies and measures for these repeat

victims, rather than broad policies aimed at preventing and mitigating aggression and violence among public workers in general. This research confirms that aggression and violence against employees in these professions still occur too frequently and that certain employees are victimised more often than others. However, the research also demonstrates that factors other than personal characteristics have a greater influence on repeat victimisation. This does not absolve us from the duty to prevent and mitigate the consequences of aggression and violence against these professions, but it seems more sensible to focus policies and measures on organisations, jobs, and team leaders rather than on repeat victims themselves. Several suggestions on how to implement these measures are included in this report.

Additionally, police officers, law enforcement officers, and firefighters are traditionally considered high-risk professions in the public sector. This research confirms that police and law enforcement officers can indeed be classified as high-risk professions. Consequently, for certain jobs and shifts within these professions, the risk of repeat victimisation is also higher. However, based on the extent of victimisation, firefighters cannot be classified as a high-risk profession. Because of limited registration and the insufficient willingness to report, the numbers presented in this research should be interpreted carefully. On the other hand, research participants confirm that firefighters are less likely to be victims of violence and aggression, and that hardly any repeat victimisation among this profession occurs. Furthermore, there are differences not only in numbers but also in the nature of interactions between citizens and police officers or law enforcement officers on the one hand, and firefighters on the other. While helping others is the primary responsibility of firefighters and contact with citizens is limited, police and law enforcement officers frequently interact in an enforcement-oriented manner and experience contact with citizens frequently. Compared to firefighters, this interactional factor makes the police and law enforcement officers more vulnerable to repeat victimisation.

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