

SEX OFFENDERS IN AND OUT OF CRIME: RECIDIVISM, CRIMINAL CAREERS AND DESISTANCE (SOC)

(NL) Seksuele delinquenten actief in en stoppen met criminaliteit: recidive, criminele carrières en desistance

(FR) Des auteurs de faits de mœurs à l'entrée et à la sortie de la criminalité : récidive, trajectoires criminelles et désistance

Partners

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Description of the project

This project focuses on sex offenders, their criminal careers, recidivism and desistance and aims to provide reliable, in-depth empirical research evidence on sex offenders in the national Belgian context. The results of this study will constitute a knowledge base that has the potential to serve as a reference for policy makers in Belgium and beyond, and to answer important scientific questions about sex offenders.

The research project consists of a multi-method study, in which major points of concern will be addressed in different ways, drawing on a range of (advanced quantitative and qualitative) methods and a variety of data, which extend from nationally representative datasets up to the in-depth qualitative study of a small sample of sex offenders released from prison.

Objectives

Different objectives are identified, namely:

1. to provide a detailed description of the criminal careers based on conviction data of a cohort of Belgian sex offenders starting from age 12 until the adult years and examine the extent to which different developmental pathways can be distinguished among sex offenders in terms of the frequency, timing and nature of their offending. These criminal careers of sex offenders will be compared with those of other types of offenders, and in order to assess the generalizability of the Belgian findings, the results will be compared with that from a comparable Dutch sex offender cohort.
2. to examine both sexual and non-sexual recidivism and subsequent offending patterns for sex offenders convicted for different types of sex offences and assess to what extent individual and criminal history characteristics predict subsequent criminal involvement.
3. to gain insight into the effects of different types of criminal sanctioning on the recidivism and subsequent offending patterns of convicted sex offenders, using quasi-experimental tests to assess the impact of sentences for matched groups.
4. to provide a detailed understanding of the impact of time-varying life circumstances, like housing, employment, and romantic relationships, on the criminal career patterns of

convicted sex offenders using detailed longitudinal post-prison supervision data on a sample of conditionally released Belgian sex offenders.

5. to gain an in-depth understanding of the ways in which being labelled as a sex offender through conviction and sanctioning, impacts the subsequent life-course of convicted sex offenders, while assessing both short-term and long-term effects and the extent to which these effects are conditional on the historical period in which the offense and subsequent labelling took place (in-depth interviews with both Belgian sex offenders recently released from prison as well as with Dutch sex offenders convicted in the late 1970s).
6. to analyse recent Belgian criminal justice policies that target sex offenders, with a particular focus on the objectives of these policies, the ideas about sex offenders in these policies, and the 'research utilization' about sex offenders by policy-makers.

Work packages

The research network will focus on these objectives in five different work packages:

WP 1. The criminal careers of sex offenders in perspective (objective 1)

In this first work package, based on national conviction data, the criminal careers of sex offenders will be compared with the criminal careers of non-sex offenders. Additional analyses will be conducted for separate types of sex offenders (based on their offence, e.g. rape, child molestation, ...) Also, the careers of sex offenders and non-sex offenders in Belgium will be compared with sex offenders and non-sex offenders in the Netherlands.

Belgian data that will be used in this work package come from a dataset that was recently constructed within the framework of a NICC-research on the prevalence of recidivism in Belgium (data from the Central Criminal Record Office). This data set contains information about all persons convicted in 1995 to a judicially imposed measure or sentence (ca. 136.000 persons), information about the offence, the measure or sentence (type, amount or length,...) and the court that imposed it. For all these offenders, their entire criminal conviction history from age 12 onwards is available, as well as new convictions between 1995 and 2013, and a number of demographic variables (e.g. sex, age). In the aforementioned NICC-research, analyses were limited to the first or only conviction in 1995 and the first or only new conviction (within a follow-up period until the end of 2013). In the context of this work package, all available data will be used in order to permit quantitative descriptive analyses of the long-term criminal careers of the entire group, and sex offenders in particular. Next to descriptive analyses that allow basic information about criminal career dimensions (onset, duration, ...), the data will be analysed using group-based trajectory modelling (GBTM).

The quantitative comparison of the criminal career dimensions of sex offenders and non-sex offenders in Belgium and in the Netherlands will draw on national datasets with comparable sizes. The Dutch data are made available by the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Dutch Ministry of Justice (existing data) and stem from the General Documentation Files (GDF) of the Criminal Record Office. The Dutch data set consisting of offenders sentenced in 1997 (ca. 153.000 persons) contains information on every criminal case registered by the police at the Public Prosecutor's Office. The data set includes the entire officially recorded criminal history, i.e. the number and type of convictions per year, starting at age 12 up to the year 2014, and provides, next to criminal career information, also information on demographic variables, such as sex, age, and nationality.

Next to descriptive analyses that compare criminal career dimensions, GBTM results for both countries will be discussed and compared.

WP 2. Sex offender recidivism: static variables and sanction type (objectives 2 & 3)

In work package 2 the importance of a number of static variables on sex offender recidivism will be assessed, including a test of the added value of risk assessment scores in the prediction of sex offender recidivism. A second dimension to this work package is a quasi-experimental assessment of the impact of types of sanctions and types of release from prison on sex offenders' recidivism.

In this work package several existing data sets are analysed with a focus on static variables predicting sex offender recidivism data sets: national conviction data (see WP 1), national prison data, and Walloon sex offender recidivism data:

- The Belgian conviction data (see WP 1) will be revisited for an additional analysis of the recidivism of sex offenders as compared to a matched group of non-sex offenders and an analysis of recidivism among different types of sex offenders. Aside from individual characteristics (age at offence, ...) and criminal history parameters (age of onset, prior number of convictions, ...), the focus of these analyses will be on the effect of the type of sentence that has been handed out on recidivism, using propensity score matching to compare groups receiving different sanction types.
- To allow a quantitative assessment of the impact of post-prison supervision on sex offenders' criminal careers (no supervision upon release vs. supervised conditional release, with behavioural restrictions), an existing data set from a previous NICC-research on convicted prisoners released in 2003-2005 (based on the program Sidis-Griffie) will be updated and extended, with particular focus on the recidivism and re-incarceration of sex offenders. Conviction data will be added and the initial follow-up period (until mid-2011) will be extended until the start of the data collection. Released sex offenders (with a sentence over 3 years; ca. 1000 released sex offenders) being released at sentence expiry (no supervision) will be compared to those being conditionally released.
- In order to examine the added value of the actuarial STATIC risk assessment tool over and above criminal history variables, a data set of released sex offenders on (mandatory) treatment in the community in the Walloon Region (data from previous UMons-research) will be revisited and extended, from 231 to ca 350 sex offenders in the community, with variables related to the sentence, the offence, and psychological variables, including scores on the STATIC instrument and an extended follow-up period.

WP 3. After prison: dynamic factors in reintegration and desistance (objective 4)

While laying a solid empirical foundation for describing criminal careers of convicted sex offenders, the nature of the available conviction data inhibits the investigation of the impact important events and transitions may have on the development of sex offending over the life span. Therefore separate analyses are planned to fill the gap.

In this work package 3, a data set will be developed, so as to allow an evaluation of the impact of time-varying social conditions and circumstances on the post-prison behaviour of (conditionally) released sex offenders. These data will help shed light on whether and how changes in the social circumstances impact upon the behaviour of sex offenders and on their reintegration and first steps towards desistance.

The focus in this work package is on sex offenders with a prison sentence of over 3 years, who were released conditionally in 2003-2005 and have left prison under community supervision that lasts at least 2 and at most 10 years (sample of ca. 500 conditionally released sex offenders, based on the prison data set mentioned under work package 2). Data will be gathered from release files, including post-prison re-entry planning (occupation, housing, ...), psychological assessments of the prisoner

(results of (actuarial) tests and other psychological variables), and written probation officers' reports that inform release decision-makers about important life domains of the supervised offender (time-varying sociological variables). Techniques will be used that allow for controlling for important methodological shortcomings of traditional tools to study the effect of transitions (fixed effects models).

WP 4. Sex offenders after prison: a qualitative study of reintegration and desistance (objective 5)

As studies using quantitative data do not address sex offenders' subjective appraisals and are blind to the way offenders themselves evaluate their actions and decisions, work package 4 will focus on how released sex offenders try to rebuild their lives, their experiences with the criminal justice system, the place and role of agency in their narratives, how they look at their sex offence and the sentence they received. This work package will provide a valuable complement to the previous work packages by adding a qualitative in-depth view, based on sex offenders themselves.

By conducting in-depth interviews the research team will try to appreciate the role of individual agency in both the continuation and the process of desisting from sexual offending. Both Belgian sex offenders recently released from prison (a sample of about 40 offenders from the prison data set) as well as Dutch sex offenders convicted in the late 1970s (at least 15-20) will be interviewed to be able to speak on the impact of the historical setting (penal climate, public opinion towards sex offenders, ...) in which these offenders were convicted, and to assess both short-term and long-term consequences of being convicted for a sex offence. The interviews will be analysed based on discourse analysis.

WP 5. Sex offender criminal policies and scientific evidence (objective 6)

Work package 5 consists of an analysis of (a selection of) criminal justice policies with respect to sex offenders that have been set up in recent years. The data analysis will draw on publicly available parliamentary documents and other materials open to the wider public that are at the basis of these policies. The analysis consists of studying which sources (scientific research, specific crises,...) are mobilized, what the underlying views are of sex offenders, why sex offenders are specifically targeted by these policies, what the objectives are of specific policies, and the place and importance of research evidence in these policies.

Deliverables

This research will produce several types of deliverables.

Next to a final scientific report, the research results will be described in an executive summary and a press communiqué, in order to disseminate the results to the wider public. During the 2-year research period several peer-reviewed articles will be published, primarily in international journals, but also in national journals (in Dutch and French), and presentations will be given during international conferences and national scientific gatherings, so as to enable an optimal dissemination of the research results.

Near the end of the research, a high-level expert seminar will be organized, during which results will be presented to and discussed with international experts in the field. A practitioner-oriented conference will be organized to communicate the results of the study to a large audience, with the aim to inform practitioners and policy-makers and to reflect about how the study results are of use for practitioners and policy-makers.