National studies on recidivism
An inventory of large-scale recidivism research in 33 European countries

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In criminology, measuring recidivism is an established method for examining the effects of penal interventions. Over the last decades the automation of police and judiciary data has opened up opportunities to do large-scale recidivism research. Interested in the scope of this type of research, the WODC – the research bureau of the Ministry of Justice in the Netherlands – has made an inventory of the studies that are carried out in Europe. It appears that at least fourteen countries have recently carried out a study on a national scale. Steps are being taken to bring these countries together and to explore the possibility of making international comparisons of reconviction rates.

European countries with and without national recidivism studies

Method
A questionnaire on the subject of large-scale recidivism research was sent out to 41 European countries. In the end, after a rerun in the summer of 2005, 33 correspondents sent in their replies; a response rate of 80 per cent.¹ The survey contained questions on three topics: the prevalence of nationwide recidivism research, the types of data that are or have been collected and the research design and methods that were used. The complete list of questions is included in the appendix. The answers of the correspondents have been entered in a database. As the information given is very divers, it is not possible to present the exact differences between the national studies. Only the main points will be discussed.

¹ There are no data from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Malta, Romania and Russia. Malta seems to have had a national study though, among prisoners released in the period 1976-1994 (Baumer, 1997).
No national recidivism studies, until now

There are 19 European countries in which national research on recidivism of any kind is lacking or was absent until 2006:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Albania</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>Slovak Republic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Armenia</td>
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<td>Greece</td>
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</table>

In Macedonia there was a national study some 25 years ago. The report was published in 1979. In Spain there seems to be no research on a national level, but there have been general studies on recidivism in Catalonia. In Greece there are some statistics, but these are retrospective in nature (General Secretariat, 2006). According to the correspondents of Armenia, Belgium, Georgia, Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic and Ukraine - there are large-scale databases in these countries that could be used for nationwide research. In Armenia, Slovak Republic and Czech Republic there actually are plans to initiate a national or large-scale study on recidivism. In other countries the reasons for not planning such a study, vary. Some correspondents report lack of finances, others suppose resources are directed to other issues or mention a lack of experience in doing this type of research.

National recidivism studies

Fourteen European countries have or recently have had a national study on recidivism. These countries are listed in table 1 together with some of the salient features of the research. Some countries, like England and Wales, have had national research for a number of years now. For these countries only one or two of the most recent studies are mentioned in the table.

Most countries have data on all possible groups of offenders of different ages and convicted for several kind of sanctions. In France and Finland though, there are national figures for the prisoner population, but general statistics on other offender groups appear lacking. In this type of study researchers determine which part of the offender group has been prosecuted before.

Another source of variation between the countries mentioned in the table is the selection period. For some countries this period is one year, for others the offenders are selected over a prolonged period of time. Some countries use more recent selection periods than others. In Germany for instance, a report was published on offenders sanctioned or released in 1994, while in England and Wales the most recent cohort that was sampled consists of juveniles dealt with by the Criminal Justice System in 2003. So, if comparisons between countries are made, one has to be aware of historical differences due to variance in the selection period. In Germany there are plans to measure recidivism annually. One-off measurements have been held in Austria. For France and Ireland it is unclear whether the research will be repeated.

The sample sizes listed in the table are approximate sizes. As data collection procedures are automated, most countries do their research on entire offender populations. Sometimes a selection is made for convenience sake. In England and Wales for instance, for the two recurrent studies mentioned, only the cases of the first quarter of the year are selected.

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2 In France part of the research is retrospective in nature, too (Lecomte & Timbart, 2003). In this type of study researchers determine which part of the offender group has been prosecuted before.

3 Another point of interest here is the selection of the group of offenders who were sent to prison. England & Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Germany include prisoners that were released during the selection period, while Austria, Sweden, Switzerland and The Netherlands select the prisoners that were convicted in the same period the other sanctions were imposed.

4 Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden already work together to develop standard criteria and methods of measuring recidivism.

5 As are in Armenia, according to our correspondent.
Table 1: Examples of national studies on recidivism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Offender group</th>
<th>Appr. N</th>
<th>Projects for repeated measurements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Pilgram (1994)</td>
<td>Adults sentenced in 1983</td>
<td>69.267</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Juveniles sentenced in 1983</td>
<td>7.292</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Department of Prison and Probation (2001)</td>
<td>Persons released from prison or with a suspended sentence</td>
<td>20.000 p.y.</td>
<td>annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England &amp; Wales</td>
<td>Spicer &amp; Glicksman (2004)</td>
<td>Adults convicted or released from prison in 2001</td>
<td>40.825</td>
<td>annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Juveniles (10-17) convicted or discharged from custody in 2003</td>
<td>38.257</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Hypén (2004)</td>
<td>Offenders convicted on an unconditional prison sentence and released in the years 1993-2001</td>
<td>30.000</td>
<td>annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Kensey &amp; Tournier, 2005</td>
<td>Prisoners released from may/1996-april/1997</td>
<td>3.000</td>
<td>unclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Jehle, Heinz &amp; Sutterer (2003)</td>
<td>Persons sentenced or released from prison in 1994</td>
<td>1.000.000</td>
<td>none, so far</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>Baumer, Wright, Kristinsdottir &amp; Gunnlaugsson (2002)</td>
<td>All persons released from prison from 1994\1 through 1998\11</td>
<td>1.176</td>
<td>annually, on re-incarceration only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland*</td>
<td>Institute of Criminology, Dublin</td>
<td>Men released from prison in 2001-2004</td>
<td>18.000</td>
<td>unclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>Mc Mullen &amp; Rudy (2001)</td>
<td>Adults with a non-custodial disposal or released from custody in 2001</td>
<td>19.413</td>
<td>annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decodts (2001)</td>
<td>Juveniles (10-16) with a non-custodial disposal or released from custody in 2001</td>
<td>627</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>Statistical Bulletin Criminal Justice series (2005)</td>
<td>Adults discharged from custody or given non-custodial sentences in 1999</td>
<td>45.245</td>
<td>annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Kriminalstatistik (2004)</td>
<td>All persons found guilty of criminal offences in 1999</td>
<td>76.700</td>
<td>annually</td>
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<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Storz (1997)</td>
<td>Adults convicted in 1986-1994</td>
<td>70.000 p.y.</td>
<td>no fixed interval</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Wartna, Tollenaar &amp; Blom (2005)</td>
<td>Adults sanctioned in 1997</td>
<td>131.000</td>
<td>annually</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Juveniles (12-18) sanctioned in 1997</td>
<td>15.000</td>
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</table>

* This study is in progress.

The definition of recidivism

As the data sources used, reflect the way the countries handle crime, there are bound to be cross-national differences in the definition of the central concept of the research. Table 2 shows the types of crime data the fourteen countries process to measure recidivism. Understandably, none of the national studies is based on self reported data on crimes committed. Eleven out of fourteen countries use records on court appearances. In these countries the operative word for recidivism is 'reconviction'. In the Netherlands about half of the penal cases are decided by the Prosecutor’s Office and never reach court. In Germany measures taken against juveniles at the prosecution level are recorded, while measures against adults that do not lead to a court appearance are not. Both countries though, include all the recorded cases and use the term ‘reconviction’ to designate the event of recidivism. So, for all practical purposes this term seems to fit fine internationally. Except perhaps for Norway, Finland and Ireland. These countries use different data; Norway on charged crime and Finland and Ireland on re-incarceration. This will pose a problem once their recidivism rates are compared internationally. In Norway and Finland however, there are plans to utilize other types of data as well.
Table 2: Types of crime data used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Austria</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>England &amp; Wales</th>
<th>Finland</th>
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<td>Police records on charged crime</td>
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<td>Judicial records on prosecuted crime</td>
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<td>Records on court appearances</td>
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</table>

Another matter for concern is the length of the observation period. In presenting figures on recidivism most countries use a standard period of observation. In the UK for instance, most research is focused on the computation of the two-year recovrtion rate. Other countries, like France, Germany or Austria, maintain a longer period of observation. As a consequence, these countries will have higher recovrtion rates. So, if one is serious about making international comparisons of recovrtion rates, the length of the follow up period is another matter that will have to be synchronized.

Supplementary data
Reconviction rates can be computed for entire populations, but also for specific groups of offenders. Table 3 shows some of the distinctions that are made in the national studies of the fourteen European countries. Most countries use type of offence and type of sanction to form the reconviction rates. The offences checked by the correspondents vary from inflicting bodily harm, sexual offences, burglary, robbery, theft and handling, fraud and forgery, criminal damage and drug offences. The types of sanctions or disposals most frequently mentioned are an unconditional prison term, a community service order, training order, probation order and a fine. Demographic variables that are often used are sex, age and nationality or land of birth. In the majority of the research recovrtion rates were broken down by previous criminal record and in many countries there is information on the region of interest too. Because the correspondents were not ask to give an exhaustive list of the data that are collected, table 3 may not be comprehensive.

Table 3: Types of data used to break down recovrtion rates

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<tr>
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<th>Austria</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>England &amp; Wales</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

The correspondents of Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Iceland indicate that the recovrtion data could routinely be linked to other sources containing social-demographic information (work status, education, income and so on). Most correspondents however, foresee technical and judicial problems when databases of different origin are structurally merged. In England and Wales an integrative system is being developed containing information on criminogenic needs. In the Netherlands data linkage is at an experimental stage.

Methods used to analyse recidivism
In all countries researchers use raw percentages to express the prevalence of recidivism. In some countries the number of new convictions is presented too. English and Dutch researchers often
compute adjusted rates in order to isolate the net effects on recidivism. In England & Wales, Norway, Switzerland and Northern Ireland logistic regression is used to analyse the influence of covariates. In the Netherlands researchers apply Cox regression. Ireland, Finland and Iceland do survival analysis procedures too. In some European countries the data have already been used to generate statistical predictions. England & Wales are advanced in this area, as the first risk assessment tool based on population data was developed in 1998. Recently similar work has been done in the Netherlands. In Finland and Northern Ireland too, the data has been or will be used to generate statistical predictions. In Scotland, Denmark, Sweden and possibly Ireland this option is under consideration.

Table 4: Methods used to analyse or quantify recidivism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tbody>
</table>

Making international comparisons

To summarise, the results of the questionnaire show that in a growing number of countries automated databases are used to do nationwide research on recidivism. In fourteen European countries now there are national statistics in one form or another. Obviously, the next step would be to make international comparisons. To this end an international working group has been formed. The primary aim of this group is to figure out the exact differences between the work done in the participating countries. From there, the representatives of those countries will try to formulate an international standard for this type of research. A standard that actually will be used to make cross-national comparisons. At the moment thirteen of the fourteen countries are participating in the working group. Once the standard has been set, other nations may join this initiative. The exchange of knowledge among experts in this field should speed up the realization of planned projects and help scientists across the world to set up their own national recidivism research.
Major publications on large-scale recidivism research in 17 European countries

Austria

Pilgram, A.
Die erste Österreichische Rückfallstatistik – ein Mittel zur Evaluation regionaler Strafenpolitik

Pilgram, A.
Wandel und regionale Varianten der Jugendgerichtspraxis auf dem Prüfstand der Österreichischen Rückfallstatistik
Österreichische Juristenzeitung, 1994, vol. 49, pp. 121-126

Catalunia

Capdevila Capdevila, M., M. Ferrer Puig, E. Luque Reina
La reincidència en el delicate en la justícia de menors
Barcelona, Generalitat de Cataluniya, 2005

Denmark

Department of Prison and Probation
Recidivism 1996-1999
Kopenhagen, Department of Prison and Probation, 2001

Kvvsgaard, B.
The criminal career: the Danish longitudinal Study
Cambridge University Press, 2003

Statistical Yearbook
Persons with imprisonment in 2001 and the number of previous imprisonments in 2003-1998
Kopenhagen, Statistics Denmark, table 228, 2005

England & Wales

Home Office
Juvenile reconviction: results from the 2001 and 2002 cohorts
London, Stationary Office, 2004

Home Office
Juvenile reconviction: results from the 2003 cohort.
London, Stationary Office, 2005

Prime, J.
Progres made against Home Office Public Service Agreement Target 10
London, Home Office, 2002

RDS NOMS
London, Home Office, 2004

RDS NOMS
London, Home Office, 2005

Spicer, K., A.Glicksman
Adult reconviction: results from the 2001 cohort
London, Home Office, 2004

Finland

Hypén, K.
Released from prison in Finland 1993-2001 and the re-entered
Helsinki, 2004

Kuivajarvi K.
Rikas maksaa rahallaan, köyhä selkänahallaan’ – tutkimus sakkovankien vankilaurasta
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# Appendix: Questionnaire on large-scale recidivism research in Europe

## STUDY
1. Is there any kind of large-scale study of recidivism in your country? If so, what is its scope? If none, please skip to question 3.
2. If there are any publications, what is the main publication of the study mentioned above?
3. Does your country have a national or large-scale database that can be used for this purpose?
   - No/yes, namely:
4. Are there any plans to initiate a national or large-scale study on recidivism? If so, when is it due?
   - If not, what are the problems blocking the realisation of such a study?

For countries in which there is neither a large-scale recidivism study nor any plans to initiate such a study, the questionnaire ends here. If there is a large-scale study on recidivism in your country or there are plans to initiate such a study, please answer as many of the following questions as possible.

## DATA
5. Which types of crime data are accessible or are being accessed (e.g. self report on committed crime, police records on reported crime, judicial records on adjudicated crime etc.)?
6. How would you describe the quality of the data?
7. Can the data be linked to other sources of information (for instance, to employment information, or to information on other criminogenic needs, mental health information, etc.)? If so, which sources are available and what kind of data do they contain? If not, what is the reason the data sources cannot be matched (e.g. technical or juridical reasons)?
8. Can you give examples of the sample sizes used for studying recidivism in your country?
9. Are these samples the entire (sub) populations for a certain period of time or are they (random) sub-samples?
10. Which types of offenders are included in the study and which are specifically excluded from analyses?
11. Do you have a fixed observation period for measuring recidivism and if so, how long is this period? Otherwise, which observation periods are used?
12. What is the type of measure for recidivism (e.g. police contact, re-arrest, judicial contact, reconviction, re-incarceration, or self reported crime etc.)?
13. Do you distinguish between different types of seriousness of recidivism? If so, which types?
14. What is the smallest time unit that can be distinguished in your data (e.g. years, months, days)?
15. Which types of offences are being distinguished (e.g. inflicting bodily harm, vandalism etc.)?
16. Which types of sanctions or disposals are being distinguished (e.g. imprisonment, community service order, fine etc.)?
17. Which demographic variables are used (e.g. ethnicity, sex, age etc.)?

## METHOD
18. What methods do you use to analyse or quantify recidivism? (Like raw percentages of recidivism or regressions)
19. Do you use or do you intend to use your data to generate statistical predictions? (e.g. adjusted rates, risk assessment).
20. Do you have projects for monitoring recidivism over time? If so, what is the interval for monitoring recidivism (for example, on a yearly basis)?