The prevalence of criminogenic needs in the Dutch adult male prison population

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Summary

Criminogenic needs are defined as features and circumstances of offenders (including their surroundings) which contribute to offending behaviour, and therefore can be used to determine the risk of recidivism. Change of static criminogenic needs (e.g. criminal history) is not possible. Dynamic needs however (e.g. the offender’s attitude), can be changed, and interventions therefore can be targeted towards these needs. The ‘what works’ approach, the most important paradigm for research and treatment of offending behaviour in last two decades, focuses on determining the predictive value of these dynamic criminogenic needs in order to tailor specific interventions. For the prevention of recidivism, this approach has been proven to be the most promising.

In this research, the prevalence of criminogenic needs in the Dutch adult male prison population has been detected, in behalf of the national programme ‘Prevention of Recidivism’, supervised by the Ministry of Justice. Special attention has been given to the relationship between criminogenic needs and the criminal career of prisoners in general, and of frequent offenders in particular.

To determine the prevalence of criminogenic needs, a translated version of OASys Two was used. OASys is a relatively new instrument for offender assessment and treatment planning, developed by the National Probation and Prison Services in England and Wales. The National Probation Service granted permission to translate and use OASys for this research. OASys was selected because of its promising psychometric features, and because the currently developed instrument for the Dutch probation and prison services will resemble the main structure of OASys.


Given the short time-span available for this research, combined with the limited possibilities for the use of file information, OASys Two has been used as an interview. For this purpose, the English version was translated and adapted. In order to determine the criminal career of prisoners, and of frequent offenders in particular, OJBD was used, a national research database for offender information. In this research, therefore, the prevalence of criminogenic needs has been primarily determined based on self-reports by prisoners. The reliability and validity of the results are not optimal, but suffice to draw first conclusions on the prevalence of criminogenic factors in the Dutch male prison population.

A representative research sample of 355 prisoners out of the total population in the entrance/intake department of 8 Dutch prisons volunteered to be interviewed. The sample consisted of 103 convicted prisoners and 252 prisoners waiting for conviction. Comparison of the research sample and a sample of non-volunteers revealed no differences regarding background variables (age, ethnicity, criminal history, etc.). However, a (relatively small) group of prisoners could not be interviewed because of a strict prison regime, sickness, or a psychiatric condition.

The most important research findings were the following:

1. Prevalence of 40% to 60% minor to severe criminogenic needs was reported by prisoners in all OASys Two sections, as could be expected. For the Prevention of Recidivism programme, possibilities for selecting and implementing interventions for dynamic criminogenic needs are clearly present.
2. The use of self-reports (OASys adapted as an interview), and the timing of the interview (just after the start of detention), probably caused prisoners to introduce cognitive distortions in answering the questions. An unknown, but probably significant amount of prisoners still denied their crime, did not accept responsibility, and overrated their own
social skills, problem solving skills and the quality of their relations with family and partners. On the other hand, the use of self-reports and the timing of the interviews show us, that these denials and distortions are part of prison reality. Programs to be implemented by the Prevention of Recidivism programme will have to find a way to deal with them. Related to this recommendation is the fact that 40% of the prisoners report a negative attitude towards supervision by prison personnel or probation officers in order to change their behaviour: they do not intend to comply.

3. Most frequently, prisoners report psychological problems, a problematic working career, friends and activities related to offending behaviour, and financial problems. Additionally, prisoners report moderate to severe problems regarding thinking and behaviour, and drug-abuse.

4. In the Dutch adult male prison population, a strikingly large proportion consist of prisoners who have both been using hard-drugs on a daily basis until their detention and who are convicted for theft, burglary or robbery.

5. In the research population, 46% could be regarded as frequent offenders. Discriminant analysis revealed daily use of hard-drugs as a dominant factor in this group. This factor was significantly correlated with a lifestyle (activities and friends) related to offending behaviour.

Using discriminant analysis, research was conducted to determine whether certain subgroups of prisoners differed from the research population in general. This research revealed the following:

6. Prisoners reporting minor to severe thinking and behaviour problems (OASys section 11) differ from prisoners without these problems on many variables. Discriminant analysis showed financial problems a more pro-criminal attitude, more violent behaviour connected to alcohol abuse, and more social isolation to be the most distinguishing variables for this group. Less distinguishing, but still significantly correlated, were a negative attitude towards work, a lifestyle more related to offending behaviour, and less motivation to discuss offending behaviour. This combination of variables shows, that prisoners with minor to severe thinking and behaviour problems are probably hard to motivate for rehabilitation programs.

7. Discriminant analysis for other subgroups (psychiatric patients, prisoners using hard-drugs on a daily basis, young prisoners (<24 y.), and prisoners in detention for violent crimes, sexual crimes or burglary/theft/robbery), revealed different profiles for these groups. For young prisoners, a profile emerged that is somewhat more positive than for prisoners older than 23 years of age. On the average, young prisoners do not have as many convictions, they report better relationships with family and friends, and – most of them still living with their parents - usually have a better living accommodation.

The most important recommendations based on this research are the following:

1. A large part of the prison population shows minor to severe thinking and behaviour problems, which are related to many other problem areas. Therefore, we recommend the Prevention of Recidivism programme to start selecting treatment programs aimed at behaviour change from a cognitive perspective and implement these on a broad level.

2. We recommend the programs mentioned under 1 to incorporate strategies to deal with denial and cognitive distortions by prisoners. Especially, the overrating of skills and possibilities needs to be addressed and replaced by a more realistic outlook.

3. Discriminant analysis for subgroups of the research population indicates the possible use of offender-profiles to select offenders for interventions/programmes. As an intermediate step, however, we recommend a thorough diagnosis of the offender’s motivation, learning style and learning possibilities.

4. To increase the motivation of individual prisoner to change their behaviour, we recommend a dual approach, including both programmes specifically targeted at individual motivation, as (the introduction of) an overall prison climate to elicit change.