

A closer look at traffic reoffenders

A study on the profile characteristics based on a selection of court files from Leuven and Mechelen

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Summary

Objective

In general, recidivism research is lacking in Belgium. Although recently more attention is being paid to that kind of research, data on traffic recidivist are difficult to acquire. The objective of current report is to present a number of traffic offenders' characteristics based on a sample of court files. This study is the first step in determining the characteristics of a risk group of traffic offenders as formulated by the Staten-Generaal van de Verkeersveiligheid (SGVV, 2007).

Method

To determine the characteristics of traffic recidivists, the data from the national database of the Police Office of Traffic Offences (i.e., the MaCH database) were analysed. That database is designed to identify traffic recidivists between various court districts. Based on the people's national number (i.e., the so-called: *Rijksregisternummer*) it can be determined whether that person has been previously convicted and for what type of offences. At first, the database seemed well suited to analyse the traffic recidivists' characteristics. However, it was not possible to generate lists of traffic recidivists using the database. After a long process of trial-and-error a new query was inserted in the database specially designed for this study. Based on that query it became possible to select all people who have at least two entries in the MaCH database. The query was not ideal because no differentiation could be made between victims and offenders and the search was only applicable to the offences committed in the court district from where the search was initiated. It implies that people who committed at least two offences in two, or more, court districts were not included in the selection. The used query appeared to be the fittest to answer our research question taking into account the technical degrees of freedom of the database.

The data of all people who had at least two entries in the database were included in our selection in the period from 01/01/2012 to 31/12/2015 for the court districts of Mechelen and Leuven. The first part of the study was of descriptive nature in which only the age and the gender could be determined based on the data in the MaCH database. A distinction was made between those who paid a fine and those who were prosecuted for traffic offences. The second part of the study consisted of a deeper analysis of the cases. A total of 220 criminal case files were randomly chosen from our initial selection of cases, where the suspects were prosecuted, and those cases files were studied in more details. It was determined whether the defendant was convicted and if so for what type of offences; the socio-economic characteristics were more profoundly analysed and whether the convict had prior convictions on his or her criminal record.

Results

The results of the first part of the study consist of 6539 people who paid a fine on the one hand, and on the other hand of 23725 people who were prosecuted. Most of the people who paid a fine were male (63%) and were about 43 years old on average. The selection of people who were prosecuted consisted of slightly more men (76%) and they were somewhat younger (39 years old) compared to those who paid a fine. In the latter group, the men were younger (39 years) than the women (41 years).

Based on the second part of study, in which the court files were studied in more details, it came to light that not all selected case files included traffic recidivists. In 132 case files it could be verified that the file belongs to a traffic recidivist. Based on those 132 files, a number of characteristics could be investigated. Most of the recidivists are males (82,6%) who are born in Belgium (77,3%) and who have the Belgian nationality (84,1%). On average, they are 39 years old and about half of them (47,7%) are not married. These features align with the profile of recidivists in international literature. Their criminal records have also been studied. All recidivist had a criminal record that consisted of seven prior convictions on average. On average, their criminal records consisted of 12 facts which results in almost two facts per single prior conviction. Most of facts were traffic related (81%) : exceeding the speed limit (25%) and driving while intoxicated (DWI; 10%) were most frequently observed. Interestingly, more than half of the women had less

than five prior convictions and both 20% of men and women have more than ten prior convictions. In addition, the data shows that the time to recidivism increases depending on the number of prior convictions, in other words: the larger the number of prior convictions the shorter the time between the convictions.

Conclusion and recommendations

The results provide a first insight on the characteristics of traffic recidivists. The study needs to be addressed as a first step in the research on traffic reoffenders rather than the conclusion of the research. Only when the target group is known, specific interventions can be developed to tackle the problem of traffic reoffenders. An important limitation of the present study relates to the MaCH database. Although the database was created to detect traffic recidivists between various court districts its use for scientific research is as straightforward as we hoped. It imposes an important limitation of the present study. In addition, our data are not representative for Flanders or Belgium as a whole since only the data in two Police Office of Traffic Offences were studied in a limited timeframe.

It is recommended to make the MaCH database more applicable for scientific research. Especially given the recommendation of the *Staten-Generaal van de Verkeersveiligheid* to conduct research to the characteristics of risk groups of traffic offenders. Using the MaCH database, it should be possible to generate lists of all traffic recidivists and Belgium and thus not limited to the area where the search in the database was initiated. In addition, the database should allow to make a differentiation between defendants and convicts. The present study fulfils one of the four possible goals of recidivism research, namely using recidivism to create an offender profile. Future research should refine the characteristics of the offender profile but also address different potential possibilities of using recidivism figures, such as the analyses of criminal careers. Only when a rich number of characteristics is available, one can begin developing specific interventions based on a model that best fits the profile of several recidivists to better protect the society against this risk group of offenders.

