SOC

Sex offenders in and out of crime: recidivism, criminal careers and desistance

DURATION	BUDGET
15/12/2015 -15/03/2018	**415.626 €**

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Context

Sex offenders are often considered as a particular group of offenders, somewhat different from offenders who commit other types of offences. Several *misconceptions* and *unfounded beliefs* exist about this group, such as the belief that sex offenders are very likely to commit new offences, that they are all drawn towards committing the same type of sex offence, and that they are (almost) reinsertable, i.e. that criminal justice interventions and/or therapy would have no effects.

Such assumptions and false beliefs stand in opposition to what *international empirical data* shows about sex offenders, including a considerable variety in sex offenders' criminal behaviour, both with regard to sex and non-sex offences. Recidivism rates for sex offending of known sex offenders are generally relatively low (e.g. Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005, find recidivism rates between 10% and 20%), while their non-sexual recidivism rates are much higher. On the other hand, research data still has a number of *knowledge gaps* and issues in need of answers on the basis of substantial and solid evidence. In Belgium, over the last decades, a number of mediatized sex crimes have led to Parliamentary inquiries (e.g. the Dutroux and accomplices inquiry and the recent inquiry about sexual abuse committed by members of the clergy). During the Parliamentary hearings, experts referred to the *lack of reliable, in-depth empirical data on sex offenders in a national context*.

Objectives

In the study conducted by a team of criminologists and clinical psychologists, this lacuna is addressed in an ambitious way. *Six objectives* are identified, all intended to shed light on sex offenders' recidivism, criminal careers, and desistance from crime. They are focused on:
1) obtaining insights about the criminal careers of sex offenders and non-sex offenders in Belgium (including a comparison of the findings with a Dutch cohort);
2) assessing individual and criminal history static predictors for sex offenders' recidivism;
3) the effects of sentences on subsequent offending patterns of convicted sex offenders;
4) an assessment of the impact of time-varying life circumstances (work, housing,…) of conditionally released sex offenders and their impact on the criminal career patterns of convicted sex offenders;
5) an in-depth qualitative understanding of being labelled a sex offender and its effects;
6) an analysis of recent Belgian criminal justice policies that target sex offenders.

Methods

Objectives 1-4 will be addressed using advanced quantitative methods (involving, inter alia, Group-Based Trajectory Modelling, GBTM). For objectives 5-6, advanced qualitative methods (content analysis, document analysis) will be mobilized.

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Potential impact

The results of this study will push forward *scientific knowledge* about sex offenders. It will show to what extent the criminal careers of sex offenders are similar to or different from other types of offenders and to what extent different types of sex offenders have different types of criminal careers (rapists, …). This will be the first Belgian criminal career research of this magnitude. The research will also assess the impact of a range of static and dynamic variables on sex offender recidivism, thus adding to the existing international knowledge base. Furthermore, the research will shed light on how sex offenders themselves look at their offences, the impact of being a convicted sex offender on their identity and also how their offence and criminal justice experiences are tied to that.

The results of the research will also provide *policy makers* with highly valuable empirical input about sex offenders. The study enables policy makers to make use of national data when drafting new policies and legislation about sex offenders. The study will also analyze several sex offender policies, with attention for the 'research utilization' in these policies. The findings will also be of interest to *practitioners* who work with sex offenders. The research will provide them with important results about the criminal careers of sex offenders, the impact of sentences and other (psychological and sociological) factors that are related to recidivism and insights in the way sex offenders experience life after prison.

In terms of *societal impact*, the research is to bring about more awareness among the wider public about sex offenders and to provide important research-based information about the realities of their criminal behaviour, recidivism and desistance.

Deliverables

The research will lead to several important results related to the criminal careers, recidivism and desistance of sex offenders. Several international *articles* will be published to report about the results. The findings will be *presented* at important scientific conferences and/or seminars. The results will also be made available in Dutch and French, so as to guarantee access of the wider public to the findings of the study. A *final report* of the SOC research network will be made publicly available. Near the end of the research, a *high-level expert seminar and a practitioner-oriented conference* will be organized.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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