

# DSP



# Beyond the offender

**Integrated insights into aggression and  
violence against first responders**

Summary

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November, 2025.

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Beyond the offender  
Integrated insights into aggression and violence against first responders

This study was conducted by DSP-groep in collaboration with Ipsos I&O, commissioned by the Research and Data Centre (WODC) at the request of the Ministry of Justice and Security and the Taskforce Onze Hulpverleners veilig (*Taskforce Protect Our First Responders*).  
This publication makes use of CBS microdata. © 2025, DSP-groep, all rights reserved.

# Research on suspects/offenders involved in aggression and violence against police officers, enforcement officers, firefighters and ambulance personnel

Employees of the police, enforcement officers (boa's domein 1), the fire service and ambulance services – collectively referred to as *first responders* – must be able to carry out their work safely and without interference. In practice, however, they are regularly confronted with aggression and violence. This is morally and socially unacceptable and repeatedly leads to broad public and political outrage. On top of this comes the personal harm suffered by the first responders who face such violence. Addressing aggression and violence against first responders and other public-facing professionals therefore remains (once again) high on the agenda for politicians, public administrators, and the organisations involved.<sup>12</sup>

The present study focuses on aggression and violence directed at the professional groups of police officers, enforcement officers, firefighters and ambulance personnel. This group is referred to collectively as first responders.<sup>3</sup>

A range of studies has been conducted to support an effective approach to addressing violence against public-sector professionals, examining various aspects such as the nature and extent of the problem, victimisation, and specific measures. However, relatively little is known about the characteristics and motives of suspects/offenders, or about the characteristics of incidents in which violence is specifically directed at first responders. At the request of the Ministry of Justice and Security and the *Taskforce Protec Our First Responders* (Taskforce Onze Hulpverleners Veilig),<sup>4</sup> and commissioned by the Research and Data Centre (WODC), DSP-groep and Ipsos I&O conducted research into these issues. This summary outlines the main findings of that study.

## Research Questions and Approach

This study aims to provide insight into the characteristics and motives of suspects/offenders, as well as the course of aggression and violence incidents. This knowledge can support the development of targeted policies to prevent aggression and violence and to strengthen the resilience of first responders. A further objective of the study is to assess the extent to which police data in combination with CBS microdata can help improve the understanding of the suspect/offender population and the incidents involved.

<sup>1</sup> As is illustrated, for example, by the 2024 government programme, which states that “first responders must be able to carry out their work safely and without obstruction, and it is entirely unacceptable for them to be confronted with aggression and violence while doing so. Victims will be supported, and offenders will be dealt with firmly.” (Government of the Netherlands, *Elaboration of the outline agreement by the Cabinet*, 13 September 2024), as well as by subsequent discussions on the criminal handling of VPT offences and the introduction of the community service ban for VPT offences (e.g. Parliamentary Papers II, 2024–2025, 28 684, no. 778).

<sup>2</sup> This renewed prioritisation follows earlier efforts under the *Safe Public Task* (Veilige Publieke Taak, VPT) programme, which focused on tackling aggression and violence against employees with a public-facing role. This programme ran from 2006 to 2016.

<sup>3</sup> This is even though police officers and enforcement officers not only perform emergency response tasks but also exercise law-enforcement, and that within the fire service a distinction is made between response, prevention and emergency assistance.

<sup>4</sup> The *Taskforce Protect Our First Responders* (Taskforce Onze Hulpverleners Veilig), established in 2021, is mandated to support the development of meaningful additional measures to address aggression and violence against first responders. The Taskforce initially focuses on police officers, municipal enforcement officers (domain 1) and fire service personnel. First responders safeguard public safety and must be able to carry out their work without obstruction, as the Taskforce emphasises. The Taskforce has re-prioritised safe employment practices, with a focus on raising awareness, identifying improvements and strengthening knowledge.

The findings of the study are based on a mixed-methods approach: a literature review, interviews with expert researchers, focus sessions, and interviews with enforcement officers, fire and ambulance personnel, a police officer, and lawyers. In addition, police data on suspects/offenders involved in aggression and violence were linked to CBS microdata containing sociodemographic, socioeconomic and other background characteristics of suspects/offenders, after which the combined data were analysed. Because the use of microdata in this context is relatively new, an additional research question was included regarding the usefulness of this method.

In this study, we use the term “aggression and violence” to refer to various forms of aggressive behaviour, including violent conduct. This may be verbal or physical in nature.

We use the term “suspect/offender” because it was not always possible to determine whether individuals identified as suspects were in fact also the offenders.

## Findings

### **Insights into the characteristics and motives of suspects/offenders involved in aggression and violence against first responders**

Based on the various research methods, a picture can be formed of the characteristics and backgrounds of suspects/offenders involved in aggression and violence against first responders. As this group displays diverse and fluid characteristics, backgrounds and motives, it is not possible to distinguish clear offender profiles. In addition, to properly understand aggression and violence directed at first responders, it is essential to consider the interaction between the individual, their behaviour and the context of the incident. Nevertheless, the study identifies several recurring characteristics, backgrounds and motives.

Suspects/offenders involved in aggression and violence against first responders are predominantly male and relatively young. Individuals aged 18 to 29 are strongly overrepresented compared to the Dutch population. Young people also tend to act more often in groups. Incidents involving people aged 50 and above occur less frequently.

The socioeconomic position of suspects/offenders is generally vulnerable. On average, they have lower levels of education, lower incomes, and are more likely to receive social benefits than the general population. Approximately 30% have been registered in the past five years as people exhibiting unexplained behaviour. Three-quarters of the suspects/offenders have prior records, and more than half have previously been suspects in a violent offence.

Motives are diverse, but expressive or emotional violence (such as frustration, powerlessness, perceived injustice or hopelessness) occurs frequently. Situational escalations of unplanned violence during an interaction with first responders also play a major role. Alcohol and drug use, as well as peer pressure, further increase this risk.

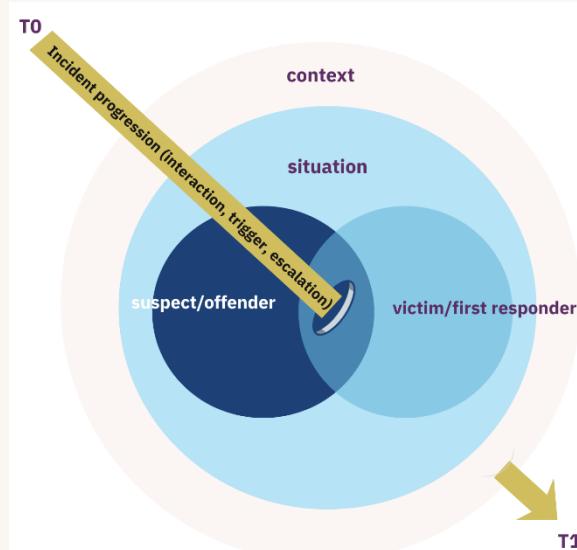
Although the tasks and activities of the four professional groups differ considerably, there are many similarities in the type of suspect/offender they encounter. Nevertheless, several differences can also be observed. For example, suspects/offenders involved in aggression and violence against police officers and enforcement officers tend to be younger and have a higher prevalence of prior offences compared to those involved in incidents targeting firefighters or ambulance personnel.

## **Insight into the characteristics and course of aggression and violence incidents against first responders**

Most violence incidents against first responders occur on public roads or on the water, followed by incidents in private homes. Incidents are concentrated in urban areas, particularly in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague. Looking at differences between the professional groups, aggression and violence against police officers occurs relatively frequently at police stations, while aggression and violence against fire and ambulance personnel takes place relatively often in private homes and healthcare facilities.

The likelihood of aggression and violence is higher in the evenings and at night, and during weekends. Around New Year's Eve, the number of incidents is relatively high. Triggers for escalation cannot be easily generalised, as they depend on the background of the suspect/offender, the situation, and the interaction with the emergency responder(s). Aggravating factors such as substance use and peer pressure play an important role. Escalation may also occur in response to enforcement actions by the police and enforcement officers.

## **Possible implications of the above insights for addressing violence against first responders**



For an effective approach, it is insufficient to focus solely on offender profiles. The results show that aggression and violence against first responders arise from a combination of personal characteristics of suspects/offenders, their interaction, the situation (for example the presence of others or peer pressure) and the wider context (such as an urban environment or New Year's Eve). Without considering the course of the incident – in which both suspects/offenders and the first responders who become victims of aggression and violence interact and play a role – as well as the situational and contextual factors in which aggression and

violence occur, such incidents cannot be properly understood. The schematic overview shows the interplay between these factors and the progression of an incident.

This results in the following implications for tackling violence against first responders:

Recognising triggers, acting with risk awareness and situational awareness, and communicating effectively are essential for prevention and de-escalation. Regular, scenario-based training – including training on the use of de-escalation techniques – and cooperation with supporting partners (such as the police in relation to enforcement officers, the fire service and ambulance services) are key pillars in this regard.

## **Usefulness of police and CBS microdata for gaining insight into the characteristics of suspects/offenders and aggression and violence incidents**

The use of linked police and CBS microdata provided valuable insights into the characteristics of suspects/offenders and the nature of incidents. This approach made it possible to obtain an accurate and comprehensive picture of the sociodemographic and socioeconomic position of suspects/offenders and to examine these data in context. At the same time, there are limitations due to incomplete and inconsistent registration, such as the recording of substance use or the lack of a

uniform registration of the VPT occupational groups. Moreover, police and CBS microdata provide limited insight into the motives of suspects/offenders. Nevertheless, this method has considerable potential for policy development and prevention, as it enables the extraction of information in a coherent manner that previously could not be substantiated (quantitatively). This potential would be significantly enhanced by improved data quality and an expansion of the dataset (linking additional relevant CBS variables, improved registration in BVH).

In addition, analysing data from comparable situations in which no aggression or violence occurred can provide further insight into both risk factors and protective factors. This helps to build a clearer picture of the potential triggers and barriers for aggression and violence directed at the first responders central to this study (police officers, enforcement officers in domain 1, firefighters and ambulance personnel).

## **In conclusion**

Aggression and violence against first responders is a complex phenomenon. It results from an interplay of the personal characteristics of suspects/offenders and of the first responders who become victims, the interactions between individuals during incidents, and a range of situational and contextual factors.

This study provides a substantiated, including quantitative, confirmation of several already known insights, including that suspects are often younger and male, are socio-economically vulnerable, and more frequently have prior offences. Incidents occur predominantly in urban areas and at high-risk times such as weekends and evening hours. The insights from this study highlight the importance of context-aware conduct by first responders, regular training in de-escalation techniques, and the improvement of registration systems to further strengthen the evidence base.

Further implications for addressing aggression and violence can be derived by also examining situations that did *not* escalate and comparing them with situationally similar cases that *did* escalate. The focus can be placed on the elements that, for given suspect/offender groups and given situations, have had a de-escalating effect or have prevented aggression and violence. For example, consider cases in which a police officer or enforcement officer engages with a group of intoxicated young people on a busy night out. How do these situations differ? What are the characteristics of the (potential) suspect/offender, of the emergency responder who becomes the victim, and of the incident? How do both parties act and respond in each case? How does the incident unfold?

Finally, we observe that a great deal of research has been and is being carried out on aggression and violence against first responders. This has generated many valuable insights. At the same time, genuinely improving the approach to tackling aggression and violence requires not only knowledge but also targeted action. For example, by actually and repeatedly training professionals in the use of de-escalation methods, or by experimenting more with different interventions. We therefore call on the government, employers and first responders to make better practical use of the knowledge that has been gained, to prevent not only aggression and violence but also *paralysis by analysis*. This calls for action.

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### **Wat we doen**

DSP-groep zorgt voor gedegen kennis, nieuwe perspectieven en positieve energie in complexe maatschappelijke opgaven. Wij ontwikkelen advies en beleid vanuit en voor de mensen om wie het gaat. Advies en beleid waar onze opdrachtgevers graag mee verder gaan. Advies en beleid dat werkt.

### **Meer weten**

Neem vrijblijvend contact met ons op voor meer informatie of om een afspraak te maken. Bezoek onze website [www.dsp-groep.nl](http://www.dsp-groep.nl) voor onze projecten.

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### **Wat we doen**

Wij willen weten gaat vooraf aan het maken van strategische keuzes en beleidsbeslissingen. Daarom voorziet Ipsos I&O overheden, publieke organisaties en bedrijven van betrouwbare onderzoeksuitkomsten die inzicht en handelingsperspectief bieden.

### **Meer weten**

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