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# Characteristics of chronic offenders in Victoria

Previous studies have demonstrated that a small number of chronic offenders are responsible for a large proportion of crime1,2. Prior Crime Statistics Agency (CSA) research has looked at this issue for a cohort of alleged offenders aged 10‑17 years3. However, to date no Victorian research has considered long-term chronic offending across all age groups. With no consensus in the published literature regarding the definition of a chronic offender4, this paper defines chronic offenders as individuals recorded by police for more than 10 alleged offender incidents during the 10-year study period.

This paper explores chronic offending in Victoria by examining a combination of offender incidents, offences and offender characteristics. An offender incident represents a series of connected events that have been linked to an individual alleged offender as recorded by Victoria Police. Each offender incident may involve multiple victims, multiple offences, or offences that occurred over a period of time if Victoria Police processed those offences as one incident. It should be noted that all offender incidents, offences and offenders recorded by police are alleged rather than proven and may not go on to be prosecuted. The current research includes all alleged offenders who were recorded by police as being involved in at least one offender incident during the 10-year period between 1 July 2008 and 30 June 2017 (the study period). This sample included 418,578 individual alleged offenders who were recorded for a total of 1,406,129 offender incidents.

The total number of offender incidents recorded for each individual alleged offender during the 10-year study period was determined. Each offender was assigned to one of five offending frequency groups based on their total number of recorded offender incidents. The five groups were: 1 offender incident, 2 offender incidents, 3-5 offender incidents, 6-10 offender incidents, or more than 10 (>10) offender incidents. Each offender’s age was calculated based on when police processed them for their first offender incident within the study period. It is important to note that individuals may have committed offences prior to 1 July 2008, however, these offences were out of the scope of the current study.

Chi-square analyses (*χ2*) were used to statistically investigate  
the relationship between offender characteristics and the   
five offending frequency groups. Where a significant χ2 was   
  
calculated, adjusted residuals were used to determine  
significant differences between expected and observed cell frequencies.

1. What proportion of offenders were recorded for more than one offender incident during the 10 years?

*Forty-three per cent of all alleged offenders were recorded for more than one offender incident.*

Table 1 shows the number of alleged offenders assigned to each offending frequency group. Fifty-seven per cent of offenders (n=239,967) were only recorded for one offender incident, while 43% of offenders (n=178,611) were recorded for more than one offender incident. Offenders recorded for more than one offender incident accounted for 82.9% of offender incidents during the study period. The 6.3% of offenders who were each recorded for more than 10 offender incidents were responsible for 43.9% of the total offender incidents recorded during the 10-year period. However, this proportion does not account for incidents that remain unsolved and therefore do not identify an offender. Offenders in the more than 10 offender incidents group were recorded for an average of 23.5 offender incidents each during the study period. It is worth noting that a greater proportion of offenders recorded for an offender incident early in the study period were recorded for more than one incident, compared with those first recorded later in the study period. However, investigating this relationship further was beyond the scope of the current study.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Offending frequency group | Alleged offenders | | Offender incidents | |
| Number | % | Number | % |
| 1 | 239,967 | 57.3 | 239,967 | 17.1 |
| 2 | 67,097 | 16.0 | 134,194 | 9.5 |
| 3 to 5 | 59,259 | 14.2 | 218,270 | 15.5 |
| 6 to 10 | 25,940 | 6.2 | 196,083 | 13.9 |
| > 10 | 26,315 | 6.3 | 617,615 | 43.9 |
| **Total** | **418,578** | **100** | **1,406,129** | **100** |

Table 1. Number and proportion of alleged offenders and offender incidents recorded in the 10 years to 30 June 2017

2. What were the ages of alleged offenders across the five offending frequency groups?

*Fifty-four per cent of alleged offenders recorded for more than 10 offender incidents were under 25 years of age at their first offender incident during the study period.*

Overall, 40.9% of the alleged offenders examined in this

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 incident | | 2 incidents | | 3-5 incidents | | 6-10 incidents | | >10 incidents | | Total | | *χ2* |
| N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| **Age at first incident during the study period \*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | *χ2*(4)=3,633.1, p<0.001 |
| 10-24 | 89,227 | 37.8 | 27,230 | 41.1 | 26,125 | 44.5 | 12,235 | 47.4 | 14,232 | 54.2 | **169,049** | **40.9** |
| 25+ | 146,714 | 62.2 | 39,067 | 58.9 | 32,544 | 55.5 | 13,556 | 52.6 | 12,010 | 45.8 | **243,891** | **59.1** |  |
| **Sex\*\*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | *χ2*(4)=2,276.4, p<0.001 |
| Male | 174,431 | 73.1 | 51,505 | 77.0 | 46,547 | 78.6 | 20,765 | 80.1 | 21,908 | 83.3 | **315,156** | **75.6** |
| Female | 64,063 | 26.9 | 15,367 | 23.0 | 12,632 | 21.4 | 5,167 | 19.9 | 4,403 | 16.7 | **101,632** | **24.4** |  |
| **Country of birth** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | **–** |
| Australia | 142,746 | 59.5 | 49,381 | 73.6 | 47,428 | 80.0 | 21,647 | 83.4 | 22,195 | 84.3 | **283,397** | **67.7** |
| All other countries | 45,829 | 19.1 | 12,401 | 18.5 | 9,163 | 15.5 | 3,287 | 12.7 | 3,164 | 12.0 | **73,844** | **17.6** |  |
| Unknown | 51,392 | 21.4 | 5,315 | 7.9 | 2,668 | 4.5 | 1,006 | 3.9 | 956 | 3.6 | **61,337** | **14.7** |  |

Table 2. Characteristics of alleged offenders across offending frequency groups

\*Excludes 5,638 alleged offenders of unknown age   
\*\*Excludes 1,790 alleged offenders of unknown sex

study were young people under the age of 25 at their first offender incident within the study period (refer to Table 2), while 59.1% were adults aged 25 or older. Offenders aged 25 or older accounted for the majority of every offending frequency group except those recorded for more than 10 offender incidents, where young offenders accounted for 54.2% of the group. A chi-square analysis showed a significant relationship between an offender’s age group and their offending frequency group during the study period (*χ2*(4)=3,633.1, *p*<0.001). Further examination revealed offenders under 25 years were significantly over-represented in the 3-5 offender incidents, 6-10 offender incidents and more than 10 offender incidents’ groups while they were significantly under-represented in the one offender incident group. There was no significant difference between age groups for those recorded for two offender incidents.

While there were fewer offenders under 25 years overall, a greater proportion of these offended at a higher frequency. Of the 169,049 offenders under 25 in this study, 8.4% were recorded for more than 10 offender incidents during the study period, compared with 4.9% of offenders aged 25 years and above. These figures are consistent with a well-established concept in criminology called the ‘age-crime curve’. This theory posits an upswing in anti-social and criminal behaviour during the teenage years that peaks in the mid to late teens and descends as people age into their 20s5. As this study was limited to examining a cross-sectional snapshot in time, further research would be required to determine whether these young offenders desist from high frequency offending as they age (as per following the ‘age-crime curve’), or continue to offend further into adulthood.

3. Were there differences in the sex of alleged offenders across the offending frequency groups?

*Eighty-three per cent of alleged offenders recorded for more than 10 offender incidents were male.*

The majority of alleged offenders in every offending frequency group were male; between 73.1% and 83.3% of each group (Table 2). However, there was still a significant relationship between sex and offending frequency group (*χ2*(4)=2,276.4, *p*<0.001). Female offenders were significantly over-represented in the group of offenders only recorded for one offender incident, accounting for 26.9% of this group. Eighty-three per cent of offenders recorded for more than 10 offender incidents were male, with analysis showing males were significantly over-represented in this group.

4. Were there differences in the country of birth of alleged offenders across offending frequency groups?

*Eighty-four per cent of alleged offenders recorded for more than 10 offender incidents were born in Australia.*

Overall, 67.7% of alleged offenders in this study were born in Australia, 17.6% were born overseas and 14.7% had an unknown country of birth. The majority of offenders in every offending frequency group were born in Australia, accounting for between 59.5% and 84.3% of each group (Table 2). Within the offending frequency groups, the greatest proportion of offenders born in Australia were in the more than 10 offender incidents group, while the greatest proportion of offenders born overseas were those in the one offender incident group. However, this analysis was limited by the 61,337 offenders with an unknown country of birth. These offenders were not evenly distributed across the offending frequency groups, with a greater number of offenders in the one incident group recorded for unknown country of birth. This result was expected as police are likely to record additional information as they have further contact with an offender.

5. What were the most common offences recorded for alleged offenders across offending frequency groups?

*Non-aggravated burglary was the most common offence type recorded for alleged offenders with more than 10 incidents.*

Offender incidents involving each recorded offence type

were examined to determine the most commonly recorded offence types for each offending frequency group. The most common offence types differed between groups, although stealing from a retail store was in the top five most common offence types for every group (Table 3). Non-aggravated burglary was the most common offence type recorded for alleged offenders in the more than 10 offender incidents group, with an average of 2.73 offender incidents involving this offence type recorded per person. Drug possession and serious assault were in the top five most common offence types for every offending frequency group except the more than 10 offender incidents group.

Table 3: Top five most common offence types+, by offending frequency group during 2008-2017

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Number of offender incidents | Mean offender incidents per person in group |
| **1 offender incident** | *Total of 239,967 offenders in group* | |
| 1. Steal from a retail store | 32,075 | 0.13 |
| 2. Common assault | 27,753 | 0.12 |
| 3. Serious assault | 27,661 | 0.12 |
| 4. Drunk and disorderly in public | 22,872 | 0.10 |
| 5. Drug possession | 20,238 | 0.08 |
| **2 offender incidents** | *Total of 67,097 offenders in group* | |
| 1. Serious assault | 15,351 | 0.23 |
| 2. Common assault | 13,331 | 0.20 |
| 3. Steal from a retail store | 13,176 | 0.20 |
| 4. Drug possession | 12,746 | 0.19 |
| 5. Criminal damage | 12,196 | 0.18 |
| **3-5 offender incidents** | *Total of 59,259 offenders in group* | |
| 1. Serious assault | 24,013 | 0.41 |
| 2. Criminal damage | 22,200 | 0.37 |
| 3. Drug possession | 21,910 | 0.37 |
| 4. Common assault | 19,224 | 0.32 |
| 5. Steal from a retail store | 18,467 | 0.31 |
| **6-10 offender incidents** | *Total of 25,940 offenders in group* | |
| 1. Criminal damage | 20,615 | 0.79 |
| 2. Drug possession | 19,883 | 0.77 |
| 3. Serious assault | 19,375 | 0.75 |
| 4. Breach family violence order | 18,570 | 0.72 |
| 5. Steal from a retail store | 15,787 | 0.61 |
| **> 10 offender incidents** | *Total of 26,315 offenders in group* | |
| 1. Non-aggravated burglary | 71,873 | 2.73 |
| 2. Steal from a retail store | 64,301 | 2.44 |
| 3. Criminal damage | 56,548 | 2.15 |
| 4. Breach bail conditions | 51,889 | 1.97 |
| 5. Other theft | 47,936 | 1.82 |

+Offenders may be recorded for more than one offence type

6. How did police outcomes differ across offending frequency groups?

*Arrest was the most commonly recorded police outcome for alleged offenders in the more than 10 offender incidents group.*

Figure 1 shows the average number of offender incidents by police outcome type (arrest, issued with a summons to appear in court, other outcome, cautioned, or intent to summons) for offenders in each of the offending frequency groups. Offenders in the more than 10 offender incidents group were arrested for an average of 12.8 offender incidents, with arrest the most commonly recorded police outcome for offenders in this group. Arrest was also the most commonly recorded outcome for offenders in the 6-10 offender incidents group, with offenders arrested for an average of 2.8 offender incidents. For offenders in each of the other offending frequency groups, summons was the most commonly recorded outcome type. The average number of offender incidents with a recorded outcome of caution was similar for offenders in each of the offending frequency groups (up to an average of 0.5 offender incidents across groups). Caution was the least commonly recorded police outcome for offenders in the more than 10 offender incidents group.

Figure 1: Mean number of offender incidents with recorded outcome type by offending frequency group during 2008-2017

\*Includes penalty infringement notices, warrant issued, and other statuses

Summary

A small proportion (6.3%) of alleged offenders in Victoria were responsible for a large proportion of crime (43.9% of offender incidents) during the 10-year study period. Fifty-four per cent of those recorded for more than 10 offender incidents were aged 10-24 at the time of their first incident within the study period, while 46% were aged 25 or older. Eighty-three per cent of the offenders in this group were male, and 84.3% of the group were born in Australia. The group’s most commonly recorded offence type was non-aggravated burglary, with an average of 2.73 incidents involving this offence type recorded per person. Arrest was the most commonly recorded police outcome for alleged offenders in this group.

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