Ministry of Justice

Prolific Offenders: Update on the characteristics of prolific offenders, 2000-2021

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Background and Definition

This publication sets out information on the characteristics of the prolific and non-prolific offending cohort between 2000 and 2021. This is an update of work previously published by the Ministry of Justice in 2017, up to the end of 2016.

The definition of a prolific offender is as follows:

1. **Juvenile prolific** – an offender is defined as a juvenile prolific if on their last appearance in the criminal justice system:

    a. they were aged 10-17 and had 4 or more previous convictions or cautions.
    b. they were aged 18-20, had a total of 8 or more previous convictions or cautions, and had less than 4 previous convictions or cautions when aged 18-20: and
    c. they were aged 21 or older, had less than 16 previous convictions or cautions, had less than 4 previous convictions or cautions when aged 18-20 and had 4 or more previous convictions or cautions when aged 10-17.
2. **Young adult prolific** – an offender is defined as a young adult prolific if on their last appearance in the criminal justice system:
    a. they were aged 18-20, had a total of 8 or more previous convictions or cautions, and had at least 4 previous convictions or cautions when aged 18-20: and
    b. they were aged 21 or older, had a total of 16 or more previous convictions or cautions, had less than 8 previous convictions or cautions when aged 21 or older, and had 4 or more previous convictions or cautions when aged between 18 and 20.
3. **Adult prolific** – an offender is defined as an adult prolific if on the last appearance in the criminal justice system:
    a. they were aged 21 or older, had a total of 16 or more previous convictions or cautions, and had 8 or more previous convictions or cautions when aged 21 or older.

Worked example: Offender A on their last appearance in the criminal justice system:

Main Body

Key Points

- Prolific offenders make up roughly one tenth (0.5 million) of the overall offender cohort (5.89 million), the same as the period up to 2016.

- Despite making up a minority of all offenders, prolific offenders are **responsible for nearly half of all sentencing occasions (10.5 million).** This remains unchanged since the previous report.

- Prolific offenders received **twice as many custodial sentences** (2.59 million) than the remaining offending population (1.10 million), between 2000 and 2021. This proportion remains unchanged since 2016.

- In 2016 prolific offenders were receiving around 4.6 custodial sentences per offender. This has **increased to 4.9** up to the year ending 2021.

- **Theft offences are the most common** types of offences in the criminal careers of prolific offenders.

- For similar offences, such as shoplifting, prolific offenders are more likely to receive a custodial sentence than their non-prolific counterparts.

Introduction

During the period 2000 to 2021 there were around 526,000 offenders that met the Ministry of Justice definition of a prolific offender. They accounted for 9% of the offending population but received just over half (52%) of all convictions and under a fifth (16%) of all cautions during their criminal careers between 2000 and 2021. This section presents the latest data (up to the end of 2021) on prolific offenders. It is worth noting that data for 2020 and 2021 may have been impacted by the COVID 19 pandemic and measures put in place such as court closures. As a result, it is possible there were fewer convictions overall in this period.

Since our last update on the characteristics of prolific offenders (including data up to 2016), the percentage of prolific offenders as a proportion of the whole offending population remains broadly unchanged at around 9%. The number of prolific offenders has increased to 526,000, from 492,000 between 2000 and 2016. Likewise, the non-prolific offending population has also increased to 5,367,000 offenders, from 4,860,000 between 2000-2016.

Demographic characteristics

Of all prolific offenders, 15,607 (3%) were aged 10 – 17, 31,973 (6%) were aged 18-20 and 478,330 (91%) were 21 or older at the time of their last appearance in the criminal justice system[1] (Table 1). Since the last publication the age profile of the prolific cohort has increased, and there have been fewer juvenile prolific offenders entering. In 2016, there were around 21,000 prolific offenders aged 10-17 at their most recent sanction, reduced to 16,000 in the 2021 cohort.

Understanding what defines a prolific offender is complex. For example, an adult having committed one offence as an adult and 17 as juvenile could not be considered a prolific

[1] The age of last appearance in the criminal justice system does not necessarily define the prolific group to which offenders belong.

adult. However, they would be a prolific juvenile, because the prolific offending occurred primarily whilst the individual was a juvenile. Based on that presumption around 84% of seemingly prolific young adults, i.e., aged 18 to 20 at the point of their most recent sentence and 25% of adults, aged 21 or over, were only prolific as a juvenile. Similarly, a quarter of adults were prolific as young adults.

Ethnic appearance between the groups shows some differences for example, the proportion of offenders who appear white is greater for prolific than non-prolific offenders (87% compared with 79%). Furthermore, the proportion of offenders described as Asian is lower in the prolific offender population (3%) than the non-prolific offending population (6%).

The proportion of male offenders remains higher in the prolific offending population (89%) than amongst non-prolific offenders (75%). Only 11% of the cohort of prolific offenders were female compared to 24% amongst non-prolific offenders. The proportion of male offenders is highest amongst Juvenile prolific offenders (92%).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of all prolific and non-prolific offenders identified between 2000-2021, defined based on their last sentencing occasion.

Characteristic	Juvenile Prolific Offender		Young Adult Prolific Offender		Adult Prolific Offender		Total Prolific Offenders		Non-Prolific Offenders	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Age at last sanction										
10 to 17	15,607	9.6%					15,607	3.0%	615,149	11.5%
18 to 20	26,774	16.4%	5,199	4.3%			31,973	6.1%	594,801	11.1%
21 and older	120,774	74.0%	114,354	95.7%	243,202	100.0%	478,330	91.0%	4,157,488	77.5%
Gender										
Female	23,260	14.3%	8,962	7.5%	23,671	9.7%	55,893	10.6%	1,313,259	24.5%
Male	139,738	85.6%	110,537	92.5%	219,507	90.3%	469,782	89.3%	4,024,826	75.0%
Unknown	157	0.1%	54	0.0%	24	0.0%	235	0.0%	29,353	0.5%
Ethnic Appearance										
White	139,453	85.5%	102,674	85.9%	215,577	88.6%	457,704	87.0%	4,216,674	78.6%
Black	15,692	9.6%	10,525	8.8%	18,185	7.5%	44,402	8.4%	380,441	7.1%
Asian	4,199	2.6%	4,047	3.4%	5693	2.3%	13,939	2.7%	320,079	6.0%
Chinese, Japanese, or SE Asian	166	0.1%	67	0.1%	135	0.1%	368	0.1%	39,359	0.7%
Middle Eastern	503	0.3%	427	0.4%	618	0.3%	1,548	0.3%	47,907	0.9%
Unknown	3,142	1.9%	1,813	1.5%	2,994	1.2%	7,949	1.5%	362,978	6.8%
Total number of Distinct Offenders	**163,155**		**119,553**		**243,202**		**525,910**		**5,367,438**	

*For table footnotes, see the notes page in the accompanying accessible tables spreadsheet.

Criminal Careers of Prolific Offenders

Prolific offenders were most likely to have started their criminal career with offences such as theft (44%) and summary offences[2] (excluding motoring) (22%). However, looking at their most recent recorded offences, prolific offenders are more likely to have committed drug offences (14%) and violent offences (10%) than on their first appearance in the criminal justice system (3% and 6%, respectively).

This is a marked pattern when compared with non-prolific offenders who show a similar distribution for first and most recent offences across the offence categories. For example, the proportion of non-prolific offenders committing violent offences is 7% on their first sanction occasion and 7% for the most recent offence.

[2] Not all summary offences are on the PNC, and several summary offences are excluded from our data extract. For example, speeding offences or keeping a vehicle on the highway without a driving licence and television-licence-fee evasion are not included. Therefore, these figures may not represent the 'true' counts of summary offences for offenders.

Charts 1 and 2 show a comparison of the first offence and most recent offence for prolific and non-prolific offenders, respectively[3].

Charts 3 and 4 show a comparison of the first disposal and most recent disposal prolific and non-prolific offenders, respectively.

Prolific offenders were more likely to receive a community penalty (21%) or a conditional discharge (16%) at their first sentencing occasion compared to non-prolific offenders (11% and 7%, respectively). Caution is the most common disposal for a first offence for both

[3] **Chart Notes (Charts 1-4)**:
Most recent offence/last sentencing occasion refers to the last recorded sentencing occasion between 2000 and 2021. The proportion in each table is calculated as a proportion of the prolific or non-prolific cohorts. E.g., the % of theft offences on the last sanction occasion refers to the number of theft offences as a proportion of last recorded sanction occasions for all prolific offenders.

groups of offenders, with non-prolific offenders slightly more likely to receive a caution for a first offence (50%) than prolific offenders (44%).

At their most recent sanction occasion, prolific offenders were more likely to have received an immediate custodial sentence (24%) than any other disposal type. The most common disposal type for non-prolific offenders at their last sanction remained a caution (42%). The average number of immediate custodial sentences per prolific offender is 5 compared to 0.2 per non-prolific offender.

Prolific offenders make up a minority of the offending cohort (9%). However, this group has received just over twice as many custodial sentences (2.6 million) than the remainder of the offending cohort (1.1 million) between 2000 and 2021.

Prolific offenders continue to commit, overall, 8 times as many offences per offender compared to non-prolific offenders (20.14 offences per offender compared with 2.49). Prolific offenders commit a higher proportion of theft offences, robberies, criminal damage offences and breach offences throughout their entire criminal career, than non-prolific offenders. Thirty-three per cent of all offences committed by prolific offenders were theft offences, compared to 18% for non-prolific offenders (Table 2). Shoplifting offences alone made up 14% of all sentencing occasions for prolific offenders.

Comparing the disposals received for shoplifting offences, prolific offenders are more likely to receive an immediate custodial sentence or community penalty compared to non-prolific offenders. Whereas non-prolific offenders are more likely to receive a caution for such an offence (Chart 5).

Chart 5 shows a comparison of disposal types for shoplifting offence occasions for prolific and non-prolific offenders, 2000-2021.

Table 2. Table showing the distribution of offence and disposal types throughout the entire offending history for prolific and non-prolific offenders identified between 2000-2021

Offence/Disposal	Number of convictions/cautions			
	All Prolific Offenders		Non-Prolific Offenders	
	%	Number per offender	%	Number per offender
Offences				
Violence against the person	4.7%	0.95	6.9%	0.17
Sexual offences	0.4%	0.08	1.2%	0.03
Robbery	1.4%	0.28	0.7%	0.02
Theft Offences	32.5%	6.55	18.2%	0.45
Criminal damage and arson	3.4%	0.69	3.2%	0.08
Drug offences	7.3%	1.47	10.6%	0.26
Possession of weapons	1.9%	0.37	2.3%	0.06
Public order offences	2.4%	0.48	2.2%	0.06
Miscellaneous crimes against society	7.8%	1.57	5.7%	0.14
Fraud offences	1.6%	0.32	2.6%	0.06
Summary offences excluding motoring	22.1%	4.44	29.8%	0.74
Summary motoring offences	5.0%	1.01	13.6%	0.34
Unknown	0.3%	0.07	0.2%	0.00
Offences outside England & Wales	1.3%	0.26	0.5%	0.01
Breach offences	7.9%	1.59	2.3%	0.06
Disposals				
Caution	7.6%	1.53	32.1%	0.80
Absolute Discharge	0.6%	0.13	0.3%	0.01
Conditional Discharge	9.8%	1.97	9.0%	0.22
Fine	21.5%	4.43	26.8%	0.67
Community Penalty	24.6%	4.95	16.7%	0.42
Suspended Sentence	4.4%	0.89	3.9%	0.10
Immediate Custody	24.4%	4.92	8.2%	0.20
Other	7.0%	1.42	3.1%	0.08
Number of all Occasions (100%)	**10,589,762**		**13,367,106**	
Number of Offenders	**525,910**		**5,367,438**	
Number of occasions per offender	**20.14**		**2.49**	

Data collection and data quality notes:

- The MoJ's extract of the Police National Computer is an admin database and therefore is subject to some inaccuracies inherent in any large-scale data recording system (e.g., mistyped data entries).
- The data was extracted in March 2022. As this is a live database, the numbers are likely to change following receipt of further data from the police. This publication only covers data up to the end of 2021.
- The figures presented here cannot be compared to those in the offending histories publication due to some methodological differences.

Related Publications:

Please find our previous publications on prolific offenders at the links below:

- Defining a prolific offender
- Characteristics of prolific offenders
- Prolific offenders: Criminal pathways and prison events
- Prison events and Offender needs
    - Associated tables

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