

## Summary

In 2015, the Netherlands were confronted with a strong increase in asylum applications. This high number of asylum seekers arriving in the country increased the pressure on the reception centres of The Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA). At the same time, an increasing number of incidents of violence and aggression were reported in the reception centres for asylum seekers (for example in the regular asylum seekers' centres (azc), in the reception locations for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (amv), and in the emergency accommodation). A safe and manageable living environment is of high significance for the residents living in the reception locations, as well as for the COA-employees and the society as a whole. Therefore, it is necessary to gain deeper insight into the nature of these incidents and to understand how they can be prevented or handled effectively. Furthermore, it is important to determine the extent to which COA-employees feel equipped to deal with these incidents. Accordingly, the aim of this research report was to answer the following questions:

1) What is the nature of incidents of violence and aggression in asylum seekers' centres?; 2) To what extent do COA-employees feel fully equipped to prevent or handle these incidents of violence and aggression in COA reception locations, and; 3) How could (new) insights be implemented to help prevent or effectively resolve incidents of violence and aggression in the future?

These questions were studied in this research project by means of four different methods: 1.) A review of the psychological literature into the characteristics of different types of aggression on the one hand, and determinants of aggression on the other hand; 2.) A statistical analysis of all incidents of violence and aggression that were registered in COA reception locations in 2016; 3.) An analysis of *critical incidents*, based on a survey in which 125 COA-employees were asked to describe the incidents they felt they were able to handle effectively as well as incidents they did not feel well-equipped to deal with. These accounts were afterwards coded on content and type of aggression; and 4.) Interviews with 19 COA-employees working at different types of reception locations.

In Chapter 6 – Discussion and Conclusion (in Dutch) – the results of these different research parts are summarized and integrated into an answer to the three research questions above. Below, a summary of the main outcomes is provided.

A majority of COA-employees indicates that they encounter incidents of violence and aggression in their work at least once a month. For many employees, incidents of violence and aggression have become part of their job of working at an asylum seekers' centre. This specifically applies to more subtle forms of aggression, such as condescending or disrespectful comments directed at employees or fellow asylum seekers. In contrast, the official registration of incidents pays more attention to the explicit forms of aggression. As a result, more subtle forms of aggression within the organisation could become overlooked, or may not be recognized in time. Notwithstanding the fact that employees emphasize that it is not feasible nor desirable to register all incidents of violence and

aggression, it is important that employees remain aware of these subtle forms of aggression. This could prevent shifting standards (which behaviour is acceptable?) and potential escalation of these subtle forms into more overt or direct forms of aggression. In conclusion, it is advisable to (also) keep track of these subtle forms of aggression.

The majority of incidents registered at reception locations are directed at other asylum seekers. One-third of all incidents of violence or aggression are directed at COA-employees. However, for the impact the aggression has on employees, it does not matter whether the employee or another asylum seeker was targeted in the incident. Especially incidents among asylum seekers can be very severe and therefore have a high impact on the employees. In the protocols or training that COA-employees receive, no specific distinction appears to be made between incidents among (groups of) residents and incidents targeted at employees. Even though the impact can be equally serious, the most effective types of intervention are dependent upon whether or not employees are a target of the aggression or violence. In conclusion, it is important to analyse (and advance) the extent in which the current protocols and aggression training courses are focused on these different types of aggression situations.

Asylum seekers that have received a negative decision concerning their asylum application, and are thus in anticipation of returning to their country of origin, are more often involved in registered incidents of violence and aggression than those who are still awaiting a decision or those who have received a positive decision in their request for asylum. Moreover, it is noteworthy that asylum seekers from countries that are designated as “safe nations” by the Dutch government are, in proportion to the total number of “safe-nation asylum seekers”, relatively more often involved in incidents than asylum seekers from so-called “unsafe nations”. It should be added that the absolute number of incidents of violence and aggression caused by asylum seekers from safe nations is significantly smaller than the absolute number of incidents caused by asylum seekers from unsafe nations, because the group of asylum seekers from safe nations is much smaller. It remains unclear why the prevalence of incidents is higher among ‘safe-nation asylum seekers’. A potential explanation could be that both asylum seekers whose request for asylum has been rejected and asylum seekers originating from safe nations find themselves in a dead-end situation, because they do not (or no longer) have a chance of receiving asylum. This could result in frustration, which could escalate into aggression. It could also induce a feeling of “having nothing to lose”, which could decrease these residents’ susceptibility to sanctions. It is therefore recommended to consider options to also provide as much prospect as possible to immigrants who do not get granted asylum. Furthermore, it could be considered to start a strategic system of privileges for these groups, in order to prevent situations in which asylum seekers feel that they have nothing to lose.

Reception locations for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (amv) are, in relation to the number of residents, faced most often with registered incidents of violence and aggression. Due to the intensive supervision of these minors, it is possible that incidents are noticed and registered more quickly. However, in the interviews with COA-employees, aggression and violence on these amv-locations are also described as more structural, while at other locations they are described as more incidental. On amv-locations, employees report a higher need for knowledge on and assistance in

## Agressie-incidenten in asielopvang

physical aggression incidents, in which employees have to decide whether to physically (re)act or withdraw.

Finally, employees overall report to be satisfied with the extent to which they are equipped to deal with aggression in the reception of asylum seekers. Still, there is some confusion about which training courses on dealing with aggression are available and/or mandatory for employees. Even though training opportunities are abundant, it seems advisable to provide a more standardized training program. Moreover, especially on amv-locations, there is a need for more clarity and training about how to handle incidents of physical violence for which the regular 'soft' interventions no longer suffice.