



# Aggression, threatening behaviour and harassment targeted at advocates – 2024 measurement

Report Ipsos I&O

# Summary

## Aim of the survey

This survey is a repeat measurement of a previous survey on aggression, threatening behaviour and harassment in the legal profession (2022).<sup>1</sup> It provides insight into the extent to which advocates experience aggression in the course of practising their profession. In addition, the survey provides a picture of the nature of the aggression that advocates face (including the form of expression and triggers) and the adverse consequences they experience as a result. Finally, the survey describes the target group's awareness of existing measures and facilities. For all aspects, the survey provides insight into the changes that have occurred since the 2022 measurement.

## Survey method

The target group for the survey consisted of advocates practising in the Netherlands in all areas of law. This is how the survey was conducted: on 21 March 2024, the Netherlands Bar sent an online newsletter inviting all advocates in the Netherlands to participate in a survey. Advocates were reminded of the survey through various channels. Advocates could participate until 30 April 2024. 714 advocates responded. The data was then weighted by age, gender, firm size and judicial district. The result is that the group of advocates participating in the survey is representative of all advocates in the Netherlands for those characteristics. The survey was conducted in the same way as in 2022 so that the results could be compared. Questions on new topics were added to the questionnaire, such as digital crime and discrimination in expressions of aggression. This measurement also focused on differences between male and female advocates.

## Main findings of the survey

### Increase in the percentage of advocates experiencing aggression

More than half the advocates (55%) had experienced at least one form of aggression in the past 12 months. Most advocates who experienced aggression were involved in multiple incidents. The most common form of aggression was verbal aggression (46%), followed by harassment (38%), threatening behaviour (24%) and finally physical aggression (4%).

In 2022, 50% of advocates had been victims of aggression. There was therefore an increase in the percentage of advocates who had been victimised. The increase was mainly due to a rise in verbal aggression and threatening behaviour.

### More female advocates than male advocates experienced aggression

The results of this survey show that aggression occurred in all areas of law and judicial districts and across all firm sizes and job types (partners, advocates, trainee advocates). As far as areas of law were concerned, proportionately most incidents were in general practice, tenancy law, the law of persons and family law, criminal law and immigration law.

Advocates working at firms with 17 or more advocates experienced aggression to a lesser extent than advocates working at smaller firms. The survey also examined differences between male

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<sup>1</sup> [Helpt advocaten maakte afgelopen jaar agressie mee | Nederlandse orde van advocaten \(advocatenorde.nl\)](https://www.advocatenorde.nl/nieuws/helpt-advocaten-maakte-afgelopen-jaar-agressie-mee)

and female advocates. More female advocates (63%) than male advocates (48%) experienced aggression.

Increase in the percentage of serious incidents

Compared to 2022, more advocates considered the incident they had experienced to be 'serious'.<sup>2</sup> In 2022, 37% of advocates rated the incident as serious. By 2024, it was 47%. Verbal aggression was predominantly rated as 'less serious' in 2024 (by 74%), while the opposite was true for threatening behaviour and harassment: of the advocates who had experienced these forms of aggression, about two-thirds considered the incident serious (68% and 63%, respectively).

Focus of aggression: mostly targeted at the advocate as an advocate

Advocates who had experienced aggression said that the aggression expressed was mainly targeted at "me in my position as an advocate" (65%) and "at me personally" (60%). The proportion indicating that the aggression was personal decreased compared to the 2022 measurement (from 67% to 60%). By contrast, there was an increase in the proportion of advocates stating that the incident was targeted at "me in my position as an advocate" (from 53% to 65%).

A quarter of female advocates found the incident to be discriminatory in nature

The current measurement asked whether advocates found the incident to be discriminatory in nature. This was the first time this question was asked as part of this measurement. Over a quarter (26%) of female advocates found the incident discriminatory in nature, compared to 4% of male advocates. For female advocates, this was mainly gender discrimination.

Most advocates discussed the incident and were satisfied with this

The vast majority of advocates experiencing aggression discussed the incident with someone (86%). The severity of the incident played a role here: of the advocates who thought the incident was serious, 92% discussed the incident with someone. Minor incidents were discussed in 80% of cases.

In 2022, too, 86% discussed the incident with someone else. Who advocates confided in did vary. The percentage of advocates who spoke to internal or external colleagues decreased. By contrast, a larger proportion spoke to the local bar president or to their own organisation's confidential counsellor.

Advocates were predominantly satisfied with how they were able to discuss the incident with others (79% being satisfied or very satisfied). Six out of ten advocates who discussed the incident with their own employer, the local bar president or the police were satisfied with the follow-up given to the discussion of the incident.

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<sup>2</sup> *Advocaten beoordeelden zelf de ernst van het meest recente incident op een schaal van 1 tot 7. Een incident dat met een score 5, 6 of 7 is beoordeeld, is in dit onderzoek getypeerd als 'ernstig'.*

Small proportion of advocates made a formal police report of the incident  
7% of the incidents were the subject of a formal police report. In 2022, the figure was 5%. Advocates only formally reported 'serious' incidents.<sup>3</sup> Almost half of the group that formally reported an incident were satisfied with how they were treated by the police (46%). However, an almost equal proportion (43%) were not satisfied. The main reasons for advocates not to report the incident were that they felt the incident was not serious enough (52%) and/or because (in their own judgment) it was not a criminal offence (28%).

Two-thirds experienced adverse effects after the incident  
Two-thirds of advocates (67%) who had been through an incident experienced adverse effects as a result. The most frequently mentioned adverse effect was a decrease in job satisfaction (54%), followed by effects on their performance as an advocate and/or how they practised their profession (22%), effects on their behaviour at work (19%) and effects on their mental health (17%). There were no significant differences between the current measurement and the 2022 measurement. However, female advocates indicated more often that the incident had an effect on them (75% had experienced an adverse effect), compared to male advocates (56% had experienced an adverse effect).

Increased satisfaction with aftercare  
The need for aftercare had changed compared to 2022. Advocates appeared to need aftercare more often. In fact, in 2022, 63% said they did not need counselling. This percentage had dropped to 57% by 2024. By contrast, the proportion indicating that there was enough support rose from 21% to 28%.

Overall, a large majority (58%) of all advocates felt that the firm responded appropriately to incidents; a smaller proportion (38%) felt that aftercare was well organised.

A larger proportion of advocates felt that the Netherlands Bar had made them sufficiently resilient  
Advocates can get support in various ways to become more resilient to aggression. Almost a quarter (23%) considered that the firm had not provided sufficient information or training in this area. Over one in six (18%) said they had received sufficient training during their vocational training. One in seven (14%) felt that the Netherlands Bar had made them sufficiently resilient.

Compared to 2022, a higher proportion of advocates felt they had been made sufficiently resilient through their vocational training (from 14% to 18%) or by the Netherlands Bar (from 9% to 14%).

Increased awareness of the Netherlands Bar's facilities  
The Netherlands Bar currently offers several facilities for advocates to increase their resilience. Awareness of a number of facilities had increased compared to 2022. This applied to the emergency line, the resilience training and the emergency button. Awareness of the safety scan

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<sup>3</sup> Advocates themselves rated the severity of the most recent incident on a scale from 1 to 7. An incident rated with a score of 5, 6 or 7 was classed as 'serious' in this survey.

had not increased. Since the last measurement, the Netherlands Bar has also been offering a number of new facilities.

Of these, the option to shield private data at the Chamber of Commerce is the best known (57% were familiar with it). Almost half of the advocates (49%) were aware of the Confidant for Advocates. The hotline at courthouses that supports advocates when they expect a lack of security around a hearing had the least awareness (29%), relatively speaking. However, the need to know more about this was relatively high (36%).

Risk of aggression mainly affects the way advocates practise their profession  
For four out of ten advocates (40%), the risk of encountering aggression affected the way they practised their profession. Compared to 2022, there was a striking difference: the percentage of advocates indicating that the risk of aggression did not affect their professional practice at all fell from 30% to 24%. For a quarter of advocates (25%), the risk of threatening behaviour, harassment or aggression affected their private lives.

One in ten advocates needed support for digital crime  
Almost seven out of ten advocates (69%) had experienced phishing in the past year. In fact, almost a third (32%) had encountered it monthly or more often. Malware had affected a quarter (25%) of advocates in the past year. The other forms, ransomware and DDoS attacks, were less common (7% and 5%, respectively). One out of ten advocates would like to see support from the Netherlands Bar specifically addressing digital resilience. This was mainly about providing information: how to recognise risks and identify attacks? And how to protect against digital attacks?