

Stopreaction

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Summary

Introduction

Stopreaction is a pedagogical and preventative means of assisting the parents of under twelve year-olds who have been drawn to the attention of the police by carrying out a minor criminal offence. After a year-long experiment and a few adjustments (see also the report "Stop-reactie, bereik, ervaringen en effecten", Department of Justice, DPJS, 2000) Stopreaction was introduced nationally on the 1st of August 2001.

The first study of Stopreaction concentrated in particular on implementation, basic requirements, the means by which organisation, settlement and co-operation take form together, and the establishment of acceptable goals for all involved parties.

The study undertaken in 2002 is a continuation of this research and focuses mainly on the preliminary phase of Stopreaction (proposition and referral by the police).

Objective and research method

In order to study the spread of Stopreaction, information was gathered on the following:

- the nature and extent of the target groups not reached by Stopreaction;
- the reasons why Stopreaction was in some cases not offered;
- the reasons why some parents refused to participate;
- the necessary policy adjustments with regards to Stopreaction.

A varied approach was used to obtain the necessary information. This involved an analysis of the registration data compiled in six specially selected police districts (in three different police corps), case interviews with the registration officer and interviews with key staff in the police and the Halt bureaus within the six police districts. Attempts were also made to interview the parents who refused to participate in Stopreaction. These attempts were largely unsuccessful.

Results: the extent of registered and (un)attained groups

Based on an analysis of the available registration data, only a limited number of under twelve year-olds appeared to have come into contact with the police in the six districts studied. The total number of under twelve year-olds recorded in the six districts was 390. Not all of these registered children, however, belonged to Stopreaction's target group: approximately 75% (295) were eligible for Stopreaction.

Only about one third of the 295 cases fully completed Stopreaction, which means that two thirds were either not invited to participate, chose not to accept the police's invitation to participate or, after approval at the police station chose to withdraw before completion.

The most important reasons for Stopreaction not reaching more of the identified target groups appeared to be the approach used by the police. Almost 42% of the 295 registered cases did not receive the invitation to participate in Stopreaction.

The influence of parents refusing to participate was found to be relatively small. Approximately 12% (9% police, 3% Halt bureaus) of the total target group did not take part in Stopreaction for this reason.

The referral of potential participants from police to Halt bureaus, and the intake process at the Halt bureau (including the previously mentioned 3%) were together responsible for a further 12% of the total non-participants. This appeared, not to be of particular significance. However, closer examination of the parents of under twelve year-olds who initially accepted the invitation to participate (143) revealed that almost 25% withdrew later on and did not complete the programme.

Assuming that the selection of police districts is sufficiently representative for a national extrapolation, and based on the finding of this study, an estimated 4500 under twelve year-olds between 5 and 12 years old are officially registered with the police each year.

A study carried out by the WODC in 1996 ("Over criminaliteit en kattenkwaad") estimated that 0,5 % of 8 to 11

year olds were officially registered with the police. This study produced a very similar result (0,52%) for the same age group in 2001. The working methods of the police with regards to Stopreaction were shown to have had an influence on the number of successfully referred cases. A greater number of cases were referred to Stopreaction in instances where the referral process was carried out by parties other than the police, although in these instances the number of parents refusing to participate was higher.

Central monitoring of the referral process had no effect on the quantitative relationship between parents agreeing and not agreeing to take part in Stop-reaction. The number of registered cases, however, appeared to be higher.

Unattained groups: reasons for not offering participation

Examination of the unattained groups, and in particular of the initial phase in which participation of Stopreaction was offered (as already mentioned, this accounted for 42% of all cases which did not result in participation), revealed that the average age of children invited to take part was slightly higher than of those children who were not invited. This observation agreed with the findings of the interviews with police and Halt staff. These groups were under the general opinion that Stopreaction is more suitable for older children. No differences were found in relation to sex and ethnic background between the groups which were invited to participate and the groups which were not invited to participate. This was found to be somewhat contradictory to the views of the Stopreaction supervisors at the police and Halt bureaus, who suggested that foreign ethnic groups were often difficult to reach. Based on the finding of this study, the most important reasons why participation in Stopreaction was not offered are as follows:

- Lack of knowledge of Stopreaction and support from the police (made especially evident during the interviews with supervisors); the registration officers were of a different opinion, although following further analysis of the interviews it appeared that the registration officers who had offered participation were often poorly or only moderately aware of Stopreaction themselves.
- Uncertainty when determining whether an offence is eligible for Stopreaction: interviews with the registration officers show that context and circumstances play a role in the decision to offer participation in Stopreaction or not.
- The parents reaction, as judged by the registration officers (difficult environment: how will they react to the child and the offence), the perceived family situation (known problems) or the child's reaction during the arrest and at the police station (enough punishment).
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- The extent of urbanisation (city or outlying districts): in particular registration officers in outlying districts seemed to look for a solution within the family or community.

A large proportion of the parents of registered under twelve year-olds appeared to know little or nothing about Stopreaction. This provided an extra obstacle to registration officers. As well as having to explain to parents the reason for reprimanding their child, they were also required to provide a detailed description of the possible steps thereafter (i.e. Stopreaction).

Unattained groups: reasons why parents refused to participate

No significant differences were observed in age and sex between children whose parents refused their participation and children whose parents agreed to their participation. Although small differences were found to exist with regard to ethnic background (parents from foreign origins appeared to be slightly more supportive of Stopreaction), this study was unable to conclude whether or not ethnic background played a role in the acceptance and non-acceptance of Stopreaction.

The most important reason why parents allowed their children to participate was that they considered Stopreaction as a means by which to demonstrate to their children that they had overstepped certain boundaries. Acceptance of Stopreaction was also determined by the parents' perception of the seriousness of their child's offence.

The most important reasons why parents refused to participate in Stop-reaction are summarized as follows:

- The parents considered their child's offence to be an act of mere mischief and found, therefore, Stopreaction to be too serious a punishment. This argument was used by parents in both minor and serious cases.
- The parents chose to punish their child themselves or felt that reprimand from the police was punishment enough. This reaction was frequently observed with minor transgressions and in cases

where the police reprimand evidently had a big impact on the child. Parents who felt they had good control of their child's upbringing were quicker to doubt the usefulness of Stopreaction.

- The parents did not welcome interference from third parties. Parents who preferred to avoid interference from government and/or police generally tended not to participate in Stopreaction.
- The parents refused to accept their child's guilt or role in an offence.
- The time between the offence and Stopreaction was too long.

Conclusions and recommendations are provided in chapter 6. The main conclusions are mentioned in this summary. In chapter 6 the importance of careful registration (systematic, complete and reliable) of under twelve year-olds is emphasised. This is important in order to get a better view of the target group and to reduce the differences that exist between perception and fact with regards to under twelve year-olds.

The recommendations of this study concentrate in particular on the following:

- investment in familiarity with and education about Stopreaction.
- Extending the familiarity with the referral procedure.
- Offering Stopreaction as one of the standard measures.
- Conducting regular case discussions.
- Combining Stopreaction with the School adoption plan.
- Clarifying the scope of Stopreaction (increase the ability to cope with given situations as well as prevention)