

SUMMARY

Background and objective of the study

A study of the Research and Documentation Centre of the Dutch Ministry of Justice (WODC) of 2002 showed that the working method of youth probation services was too varied in practice. A large number of methodologies were applied, which varied from probation officer to probation officer, but also between the various organisations which provide youth probation services. In order to increase the uniformity of the working method and to professionalise youth probation services, a new methodology has been developed on the initiative of the Ministry of Justice and the Social Entrepreneurs Group (MOgroep). This method is described in the Handbook Method Youth Probation (Handboek Methode Jeugdreclassering). In 2006, a start was made with the implementation of this handbook. As from 2010, all organisations involved are obliged to work in accordance with the method. The Ministry planned to map out the state of affairs with regard to the implementation and possible bottlenecks of the methodology three years after the implementation. In the beginning of 2009, the WODC commissioned Regioplan Policy Research to carry out a process evaluation of the new methodology. This study is explicitly not intended as an effect evaluation of the methodology, for which it is as yet too early.

Research design: three stages

The main part of the research activities took place between May and December of 2009. The study consisted of three stages:

1. a general inventory round by telephone among behavioural scientists and team leaders of fifteen organisations that provide youth probation services (13 Offices for Juvenile Care (Bureaus Jeugdzorg, BJZ), the Salvation Army and an organisation which provides youth probation services to disabled youngsters (William Schrikker Stichting)). This stage is intended to obtain a first overview of the use of the new methodology by all organisations, the question whether employees are trained, whether the handbook is regarded as a useful instrument and which pros and cons are mentioned. In addition, by means of this stage the number of closed (and advanced) cases which have been carried out in accordance with the new methodology can be estimated. This information is necessary for the document study at the BJZ offices.
2. a study of a hundred cases at nine BJZ offices and additional interviews with fifty youth probation officers. The handbook requires that a number of phases are followed in the process of supervising youngsters and that these phases are described in written reports. This stage of the document study provides factual insight into the extent to which probation officers work according to the handbook, both with regard to content and procedures. The additional interviews reflect the views of the youth probation officers themselves on the use, working method, and pros and

- cons of the handbook, and uniformity and professionalism.
3. telephone interviews with two other organisations involved in youth probation, the Child Protection Board (Raad voor de Kinderbescherming) and the Public Prosecutor (Openbaar Ministerie) (both 11 respondents). In this last stage we investigated to what extent these two organisations consider the work of youth probation services as professional and uniform and whether they have observed changes with respect to this in the last few years.

General familiarity with the Handbook Method Youth Probation

From the inventory round among behavioural scientists and team leaders it appears that all the organisations under study that provide youth probation services are familiar with the handbook. Most respondents indicate that the working method of youth probation services is in principle in line with the handbook requirements and that this applies to different kinds of supervision programmes (for instance: the intensive programmes Hard Core (the 'final opportunity programme') and CRIEM (for first offenders and offenders of foreign origin)). This also applies to all but one of the other sub-locations (insofar as they exist). Employees who already worked as youth probation officers before the implementation of the handbook followed a training course during the implementation process. The course in question consisted of five sessions (on five days). Other employees usually follow a course within half a year after they have been appointed. Both courses, for 'old' and new employees, are obligatory: in case of illness the missed session must be made up. The content of the course is both theoretical and practical in nature. Moreover, from conversations with youth probation officers it appears that the vast majority of the employees still receive support in using the handbook and also receive feedback on the way they apply the handbook in practice.

View and changed working method

The vast majority of the organisations appreciate the importance of the handbook. However, a number of team leaders and behavioural scientists mention that there had been opposition to the new method in the beginning of the implementation process. Uniformity of the working method, a more purposeful approach, and an increased structure are (spontaneously) mentioned as significant aspect of the handbook. It is frequently mentioned that the handbook in its entirety is regarded as useful. Due to the fact that the work is done according to a well-founded method, youth probation officers can better account for the choices they make. In addition, the method of working is more transparent and the image of youth probation has become clearer. Youth probation officers themselves regard the intended uniformity within youth probation services as positive and the vast majority is of the opinion that the handbook actively contributes to this in practice or at least that it has the potential to do so. The large majority of youth probation officers also claim that the handbook has an influence on their own professionalism. It is alleged that the work approach has become more purposeful, structured, gradual, measurable and verifiable and that a more critical work attitude is adopted.

A number of organisations indicate that they regard certain specific parts of the handbook as less useful. The most important example of this is the current risk assessment instrument, the Washington State Juvenile Court Pre-Screen Assessment. It is argued that the instrument does not take into account all relevant information in the assessment, that it is not sensitive enough with regard to changes and that it is too much geared to the American situation and not valid for the Dutch situation.

At the level of supervision a change of the working method is observed: before, the so-called social environments of the youngster would be mapped out and the main focus would be on putting the youngster's life back on track. Since the implementation of the handbook, the focus has shifted towards the prevention of re-offending by more purposefully focusing on those criminogenic factors of the youngster which can be influenced. In addition, it is suggested that assistance is no longer started immediately, but that first the state of affairs is contemplated: the intensity of the supervision is determined after assessing the risk of re-offending and damage. From the conversations with the youth probation officers it appears that some elements of the handbook have not completely been incorporated yet. Not every youth probation officer is able to distinguish the differences in content between the three routes. Often they asked the interviewer questions about the exact import of the routes. Furthermore, it turned out that youth probation officers also find it hard to distinguish the routes in practice. It was often indicated that a route is applied subconsciously and in close connection with other routes when working with the youngsters in practice.

Bottlenecks of the methodology

Despite the fact that the importance of the Handbook Method Youth Probation is broadly based, certain bottlenecks can be identified. The criticism that is uttered most often is that the new method requires frequent and extensive reports on behalf of other organisations involved in youth probation. The lack of user-friendliness of the new forms is another point of criticism. A number of team leaders and behavioural scientists mention that youth probation officers think the formats are poorly organised, the lay-out is rather messy, there is too much repetition and the use of words is too complicated for youngsters. Besides, the handbook itself is also being criticised for being too bulky and difficult to read. Furthermore, a number of subjects are not treated in the handbook. No attention is paid to the subject of sexuality and other cultures. In addition, the handbook doesn't seem to be geared to compulsory education cases and cases in which the child has also been placed under supervision due to child-raising problems, which in practice turns out to be a difficult problem (especially with regard to the latter cases).

Not all the bottlenecks indicated by the team leaders and behavioural scientists were recognised as such by all youth probation officers. However, with regard to one bottleneck the vast majority of the youth probation officers are in agreement: the caseload is too high to be able to apply the handbook in its entirety. Two main other bottlenecks which emerged from the interviews

with youth probation officers, are the limited connection of the handbook with compulsory education cases and the rigidity of the risk assessment instrument.

Application of the methodology in practice

The document study shows that the organisations extensively apply the methodology. However, there are certain points for improvement. Moreover, this mainly concerns medium-sized and small organisations. Below the core results of the document study are summarised.

An important starting point of the Handbook Method Youth Probation is that at the beginning of the supervision programme (diagnostic phase in action plan) an assessment is made of the risk of re-offending of the youngster with the help of a scientifically based method (the risk assessment instrument). Another central point of the new methodology is the identification of criminogenic factors (offence-related factors) during the diagnostic phase. After all, the approach is supposed to be geared to those factors (which can be influenced) that are actually connected with the offence committed. The document study shows that the majority of the organisations indeed apply the various steps described in the Handbook. However, a considerable part of the organisations, about a quarter, does not make assessments based on the risk assessment instrument. For the most part, this concerns smaller organisations. In nearly a fifth of the cases it turns out that offence-related factors have not been made explicit.

According to the methodology, the diagnostic phase should lead to a concrete work plan, in which the objectives to decrease the risk of re-offending of the youngsters are clarified. In nearly all cases which contained a work plan, the objectives that apply to the youngster are made explicit. However, the reason why these specific objectives have been chosen is less often specified. The document study also shows that the parents of the youngsters are involved in the supervision programme. In addition to the youngster, the parents are also asked to share their ideas on what they think is important with respect to the supervision programme, what their needs are (responsivity), and what their tasks are in the programme. Later in the process, their opinion is asked on the way the supervision programme has worked out and on the reports that have been written about their son or daughter. The responsivity of the youngster is also tested and committed to paper in the vast majority of the cases under study, as well as limitations, strong points and important sources of support in their environment. The learning style of the youngster is often, in about a quarter of the cases, omitted.

The handbook also requires that the action plan is evaluated each half year, and that a new action plan be written on the basis of this evaluation. It turns out that only in half of the cases this was done. Less than two-thirds of the programmes in which interim evaluations took place, have been evaluated after a period of half a year. The interim evaluations of most other programmes took place later than that, which is by the way in conformity with the Youth

Care Act (Wet op de jeugdzorg). With regard to content, the interim evaluations are usually in accordance with the requirements of the handbook. The development of the programme is described, as well as the extent to which the objectives of the action plan have been met and the current state of affairs. The only part that is less often committed to paper is the question whether victim/perpetrator mediation took place.

At the end of a supervision programme, a final report must be written. The files of large organisations significantly more frequently contained these reports than the files of smaller organisations. In nearly all cases the work objectives are evaluated, whereas the ultimate (general) objective of youth probation, that the youngster no longer commits criminal offences, and is no longer illegally absent from school, is omitted in a number of cases (more than a quarter). In the final report, the risk of re-offending is nearly always re-assessed, according to the requirements of the handbook. However, in most of the cases this risk is only based on the supervisor's own assessment, and less often on his own assessment in combination with the risk assessment instrument.

When the supervision programme does not develop the way it should, the youth probation officer is supposed to report this back to the Child Protection Board and the Public Prosecutor. This situation occurred in a minority of cases. Three elements kept recurring, namely: the reason behind the negative report, the development and the nature of the moments of contact and a conclusion including an advice of the youth probation officer. The opinions of the youngster and the parents about the programme and the negative report were not always included in the report.

Assessment work youth probation services by other organisations involved

From the telephone interviews with the Child Protection Board and the Public Prosecutor we may conclude that both parties share the opinion that there is a high degree of professionalism at youth probation services. Aspects that are mentioned are: large commitment, extensive know-how, and orientation towards the Child Protection Board and the Public Prosecutor (approach and consultation). However, a number of comments were made: the degree of professionalism can vary from one youth probation officer to another, procedures are not always followed correctly (deadlines of reports, detailedness of reports), sometimes youth probation officers take an individualistic approach and sometimes youth probation services continue the supervision programme for a longer period of time than the Child Protection Board and the Public Prosecutor allow for. A small majority of the respondents of the Child Protection Board and the Public Prosecutor have observed a clear improvement with respect to professionalism. Some of the respondents (spontaneously) mention that this is the result of the new working method, which is now more geared to reducing the risk of re-offending. Respondents of the Public Prosecutor regard this as the effect of the new structure of the reports.

With regard to uniformity of the working method of youth probation services, the Child Protection Board more frequently observes an improvement over the past few years than the Public Prosecutor. One of the improvements that are mentioned is that reports are similar in structure, and also reflect a similar systematic approach, such as the assessment of the risk of re-offending and criminogenic factors. Youth probation officers also work more often as case managers: the actual treatment of the youngsters is outsourced more often. A number of respondents of both the Child Protection Board and the Public Prosecutor also comment that youth probation is not completely uniform and can never be fully standardised, because of the diversity of the people involved. The Child Protection Board generally judges the reports more positively than the Public Prosecutor and the case managers of the Child Protection Board also observes changes in (the quality of) the reports more frequently than the Public Prosecutors that have been interviewed. However, it must be taken into account that not all respondents of the Public Prosecutor have an opinion on all reports, because it turned out that they do not receive all the reports.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study and a comparison with the results of the WODC-study of 2002, we may conclude that the current working method of youth probation services seems better structured and more uniform than before. This becomes apparent from the similar phases that youth probation officers follow in the supervision programme and the way they report (to other organisations involved). However, youth probation officers are still able to choose which aspects of the supervision programme they emphasise and to apply their own methodological principles. It should be mentioned that this was precisely the intention of the Handbook Method Youth Probation and that this freedom of action, within the bounds of the methodology, is appreciated by the youth probation officers.