

## SUMMARY

### Background of the research

Gaining insight into victims' experience with victim assistance normally involves measuring satisfaction. Due to the difficulties inherent to satisfaction research, measuring quality rather than satisfaction is to be preferred. In the Netherlands, this type of research into client experience is common practice in evaluations of performance of health care professionals.

Among the first steps in the development of regular measurements of quality in the Dutch system of victim assistance were the report *From satisfaction to quality: a measurement instrument for victim assistance (Van tevredenheid naar kwaliteit: een meetinstrument voor de slachtofferzorg)* and the draft survey questionnaire included in the report. Respondents were asked to fill out a list of items on the basis of their experiences with victim assistance. They were subsequently asked to rate the importance of the item in question.

The Ministry of Security and Justice intends to use the results of the *From satisfaction to quality* report to periodically monitor victims' experiences. To this end, it is necessary that the Ministry gains insight into how the survey can be implemented in practice. In addition, a pilot survey using the questionnaire revealed two major issues to be resolved before large scale implementation is feasible. The first concerns the extent to which respondents were able to understand the questions posed. It appeared that respondents misinterpreted some of the items in the survey. Secondly, the response to the survey was poor. Only 14% of the gross sample completed the questionnaire, which diminishes the survey's reliability.

### Research goals and methods

The current research, which Intervict conducted at the behest of the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, aims to further the development of the victim assistance monitor. Three objectives lie at the heart of the project:

- *Improving comprehensibility.* To review and increase the respondents' understanding of the survey questions, the questionnaire was evaluated in two series of in-depth interviews with people who had recently contacted victim assistance. In total, 18 interviews were conducted. Criteria for inclusion of respondents related to expected difficulties (non-Dutch speaking, less-educated respondents) in understanding the questionnaire.
- *Reducing non-response.* A literature review of non-response to survey questionnaires was conducted. The results of this review, in part through a set of six expert interviews, were applied to the specific subject of victims' experiences with the criminal justice system.
- *Developing 'building blocks' for the implementation of the monitor.* The results of the research into the first two objectives, combined with in-depth interviews and a focus group of relevant organizations – the police, the prosecution service, the judiciary and victim support – were used to develop 'building blocks' and give advice on the implementation of the monitor.

### **Improving the comprehensibility of the questionnaire**

The questionnaire was put to respondents in two series. After the first series of interviews, the questionnaire was amended on the basis of the preliminary findings. The amended questionnaire was used for the second series of interviews. Both series have led to a number of changes in individual questions. The main general findings, which are summarized here, have all been incorporated in the final version of the questionnaire.

- *Necessity of simpler grammar.* Throughout the questionnaire, relatively complex terminology has been replaced by simpler synonyms. The introductions of the questions have been shortened for the same reason.
- *Use of statements.* For a number of the questions concerning experiences, the response categories did not fit their corresponding questions. To ensure consistency in the scaling of response categories, all questions concerning experiences employ statements.
- *Confusion over questions of importance.* A central theme in the questionnaire is the distinction between questions concerning experiences and questions concerning importance. However, without consistent reminders, a number of respondents used their experience with rather than their assessment of the importance of an item to answer questions in the latter category.
- *Adaptation of subject matter.* The results revealed the necessity of two changes in the content of the questionnaire. In the first place, respondents only reported experiences with the judge, and not with any other court staff members. The questions concerning the courts therefore solely consider the experience with the judge. Secondly, respondents did not understand what was meant by 'victims' rights'. In the context of criminal justice they solely associated rights with the defendant. Instead of using the term 'victims' rights', the questionnaire currently refers to 'services to which I am entitled'.
- *Length of questionnaire.* The printed version of the questionnaire is fairly long because of the multitude of references in the questionnaire, and this can make the printed version of the questionnaire off-putting for potential participants. Moreover, the questionnaire is too long for victims whose contact with victim assistance was brief.

### **Reducing non-response**

Options to reduce non-response to the questionnaire were explored through a literature review and interviews with six experts. The most important results are the following:

- *Use of 'negative consent' procedure.* In the pilot study with the questionnaire, potential respondents were initially contacted by prosecution service officials, who asked them if they would consent to being referred to the researchers for a survey. Only when the respondents actively consented, were the researchers allowed to approach them. This type of 'positive consent' procedure reduces response. A 'negative consent' procedure is preferable. Here the referring organization approaches potential respondents, who can inform the referring organization that they do *not* want to participate. When no response is received from the respondents, the researchers approach them, explain the purpose and procedure of the survey and request their cooperation.
- *A mixed-mode approach.* The experts recommended a mixed-mode approach to reduce non-response. In this case this would entail sending participants a link to

an internet-based survey, followed by a written reminder and finally contact by telephone.

- *Basic Question Procedure (BQP)*. Contact by telephone allows the use of a BQP. Potential respondents who refuse participation are posed one question. This procedure attempts to assess the bias caused by non-response.
- *Reduction of the period between contact and research*. The longer the period between the contact with victim assistance and the questionnaire, the stronger the probability that victims forget their experiences. Also, subsequent experiences may cloud the victims' assessment of their earlier experiences. Ensuing problems may be reduced by implementing the monitor in phases or by contacting different groups of victims: those who have recently reported their victimization to the police and those who have recent experience with later stages in the criminal justice process (prosecution, trial).

### **Developing building blocks for implementation of the monitor**

The victim assistance monitor aims to survey the quality of victim assistance in the Netherlands and offer avenues for improving policy and practice. In other words, the monitor should offer a clear picture of the quality of victim assistance from the perspective of victims, as well as help the Ministry of Security and Justice and victim assistance organizations to make the best possible use of the results. The research has resulted in the following building blocks for implementing the monitor:

- *Building block 1: The questionnaire, adapted where needed*. The development of the questionnaire was a long and thorough process. The content, structure and comprehensibility of the questionnaire have been extensively reviewed. The questionnaire is therefore well suited to be used in the monitor. However, it is not necessary to use the whole questionnaire in all cases. In line with survey practice in health care, the questions concerning the importance of items need not be included in every survey wave. For victims who have only had brief contact with victim assistance, the questionnaire is too extensive. A smaller number of key questions should suffice to probe the experience of these victims.
- *Building block 2: Negative consent procedure (preferably)*. It is preferable to use a negative consent procedure to approach potential respondents. Referring organizations approach potential respondents, who are then contacted by the researchers without further notice if they have not explicitly denied permission.
- *Building block 3: Mixed-mode approach*. Respondents are contacted through two different methods: first a written request (by letter or e-mail) to fill out an internet survey, followed by telephone calls.
- *Building block 4: High-quality communication surrounding the research*. Improving communication surrounding the research may well reduce non-response, for instance by emphasizing the importance of participation for potential respondent and the authority of the organizations involved, while simultaneously relieving the possible stress of participation for respondents.
- *Building block 5: A picture of the entire system of victim assistance*. The Ministry needs the instrument to review the quality of victim assistance in its entirety. This implies that the questionnaire should enable comparison of different components of victim assistance and that an external organization should conduct the monitor.
- *Building block 6: Minimized burden for relevant organizations*. The organizations involved in victim assistance favour the use of the monitor. *Slachtofferhulp*

*Nederland* (Victim Support the Netherlands) currently conducts extensive research into the experience of its own clients, to which the monitor may have little to add. The time between waves must be sufficient to use the results in policy and practice. Preferably there should be three years between survey waves.

### **Implementation advice**

The researchers have translated the project findings into advice on the implementation of the monitor. The following elements of this advice have already been discussed: reduction of the length of the questionnaire, where possible and where necessary; periodical execution by an external organization; and a mixed-mode approach, including telephone contacts and a negative consent procedure.

In addition, the advice explores the following implementation elements:

- *Contact respondents early.* It is crucial that the respondents can clearly recollect their experiences with victim assistance. For this reason, it has been proposed to contact victims who reported their victimization to the police between four and six months ago and victims who were contacted by the prosecution service between six and eight months ago. The former group should be queried on their experiences with the police and victim support, the latter group on their experiences with the prosecution service, the judge and victim support.
- *Use police and prosecution service data.* The consequence of implementing this element of the advice is that two separate samples of victims are to be approached through the police and the prosecution service. The samples are to be drawn from the police register *Basisvoorziening Handhaving* and the prosecution service register *COMPAS*.
- *Guarantee preconditions.* The proposed mode of research is not cheap. Within the organizations involved, sufficient time must be made available to assist with data collection. It has to be ascertained in advance whether the registrations allow valid sampling.