

Summary

Recidivism after Tools4U Comparative recidivism research Tools4U 2012

Tools4U is a social skills training imposed as a penal sanction aimed at increasing the social and cognitive skills of youth aged 12 to 18 years with a medium-sized risk of reoffending. Previous research into the effectiveness of this intervention has found positive results regarding social and cognitive skills. In addition, Tools4U is generally in line with the *What Works* principles, principles any intervention aiming to effectively reduce recidivism should comply to.

A previous study into the effects of Tools4U on recidivism compared 115 Tools4U participants to 108 youth with community service order a year later. Propensity score matching (PSM) was used to match these youth to the Tools4U participants. No significant differences were found between the Tools4U group and this control group after periods of 6 months, 12 months, the longest available period for all youth (1.46 years), or for the maximum observed period (2.76 years). Furthermore, no moderating effects were found for age, gender, ethnic background, or criminal history. A marginally significant effect was found for violent offences: if Tools4U participants reoffended they were less likely to commit a violent offence than youth in the control group. The current study extends this previous work, with its relatively short follow-up period, by examining recidivism over a longer time frame. Furthermore, the previous study made use of a control group recruited a year after the Tools4U group, resulting in a different observation period for the two groups. The current study makes use of an additional control group, made up of youth with a community service order during the same period as the Tools4U participants received their training order. In addition, analyses were carried out on the influence of social and cognitive skills measured at entry.

In the current study the following research questions are examined:

- To what extent is Tools4U effective in reducing recidivism? As measured by:
 - prevalence of recidivism;
 - seriousness of first new offence.
- Does the effectiveness of Tools4U depend on participant characteristics? Namely:
 - age, gender, ethnic background, criminal history;
 - skills deficiency measured at entry.

Method

This study uses data from several sources. The primary data source was compiled to research the effect of Tools4U on social and cognitive skills. Data from the Research and Policy Database for Judicial Information (in Dutch: OBJD) were linked to this data. Data from the OBJD was used to examine the criminal careers of the youth. The study covers 115 juvenile offenders who completed the Tools4U training in 2012. Recidivism by the Tools4U participants was compared to that of the two control groups. Control group 1 was compiled for a previous study into the effectiveness of Tools4U. Propensity score matching (PSM) was used to match the Tools4U participants to 108 juvenile offenders who were assigned community service or a different training order between 2013 and 2014. Control group 2 was also compiled using

PSM. For this group, the matching was carried out using the following ten background characteristics from the OBJD: gender, age at end of order, birth country, type of offence, sentencing district, modality (public prosecution office/juvenile court), seriousness of conviction offence, age at first conviction, number of previous convictions, and criminal case density. Control group 2 contains 115 juvenile offenders.

Recidivism was measured according to the regular methods of the WODC Recidivism Monitor. In this study, we examined the prevalence of recidivism, as well as the seriousness of the first new offence.

Results

Few differences were found between the background characteristics of the Tools4U participants and the control groups. Comparisons that did reach statistical significance were type of offence, age at first conviction, and sentencing district, between control group 1 and Tools4U participants.

Examining recidivism, we found that a year after completion of Tools4U 17% of participants had reoffended. After two years, this increased to 27% and after three years to 41%. Recidivism rates after one and two years for control group 1 were higher. After one year 25% of the youth in this group had reoffended and after two years 33% had reoffended. The rates for reoffending after three years were slightly lower for control group 1 than for the Tools4U participants, namely 38%. For control group 2 reoffending rates were 20% in the first year, 32% in the second year, and 38% in the third year. These differences in recidivism rates between the Tools4U participants and the two control groups were, however, not statistically significant.

The average seriousness of the first new offence by Tools4U participants was slightly higher than that for both control groups. However, these differences were not statistically significant. The results of the current study on recidivism, therefore, do not provide evidence for the effectiveness of Tools4U.

Finally, we examined whether the effect of participation in Tools4U differed according to participant characteristics. Only control group 1 was used for this analysis, as we did not have data on skills deficiencies for control group 2 and this was our specific area of interest. The results of the moderation analysis indicated that youth in the control group who demonstrated problems with minimizing or mislabelling at entry were more likely to reoffend than the Tools4U participants who demonstrated these deficiencies at entry. No significant effects were found for any of the other skill deficiencies or background characteristics when comparing the Tools4U participants with the control group.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study we are unable to conclude that Tools4U is more or less effective than other training or community service orders in preventing recidivism. This result is surprising given that, based on previous research, Tools4U fulfils almost all the criteria necessary for an effective intervention. Furthermore, our findings are not in line with previous research into social skills training for juvenile offenders, which have found small positive long term effects. However, in these studies the program integrity was often not thoroughly measured and as a result other techniques used parallel to the intervention may have played a role. Furthermore, most previous studies have compared a group receiving social skills training

to a control group who received no treatment. The difference between the groups may, therefore, have simply been a consequence of receiving something rather than nothing, i.e., an 'attention' effect. Finally, Tools4U is not aimed at a very severe target group. It is consequently not very intensive, with little room for addressing multiple issues. Therefore, effect sizes are likely to be small and difficult to detect in a single study. In the Netherlands, few interventions have been shown to effectively reduce recidivism.

The one effect we did find was that youth in the control group who prior to the study demonstrated problems with minimizing and mislabelling were more likely to reoffend than Tools4U participants. This finding is in line with the results of a previous study into the effects of Tools4U on social and cognitive skills. That study found a marginally significant effect in this area, namely, that Tools4U participants made greater improvements in the problem areas of minimizing and mislabelling compared to the control group.

The results of this study need to be interpreted with caution. First, the participants were not randomly assigned to the Tools4U group. As a consequence, other unknown factors may have influenced the differences between the Tools4U participants and the control groups. Second, it is possible that the study did not have enough participants to be able to detect small but significant effects of the intervention. The results of this report mean that in practice the Tools4U intervention is likely less effective than has been previously considered. However, the extent to which Tools4U follows the *What Works* principles, based on previous research, does provide possibilities for improving the implementation of this intervention. In addition, future research is needed to examine broader outcome measures, such as (self-reported) police contact, daily routines, education, and employment. Such research would determine whether Tools4U is effective in making improvements in these areas. Studying a larger number of participants would also be preferable in order to detect small effects in these areas.