

Summary

Profiling the target group of the youth probation service

A mixed methods study into meaningful profiles and appropriate supervision and guidance.

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April 2024

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Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Datacentrum (WODC)
Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid

Financiering

Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Datacentrum (WODC)
Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid

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Dit onderzoek is uitgevoerd door de onderzoeksgroep Forensische Geestelijke Gezondheidszorg – gelieerd aan Tilburg University – in opdracht van het Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Datacentrum (WODC) van het Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid.

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Summary

Introduction

From 2008 to 2022, the number of youngsters encountering police and/or judiciary involvement has significantly decreased in the Netherlands (Van der Laan et al., 2021; Kessels, 2023). However, this decrease exhibited some fluctuations, with a slight increase from 2021 to 2022 followed by a slight decrease between 2022 and 2023. An important factor contributing to the decline in juvenile delinquency is the implementation of a person-centred approach, involving targeted screening for risk and protective factors and the utilization of evidence-based interventions (Kamerstukken II, 28 741, nr. 53, 2018-2019). For strengthening an effective approach to youth crime, the further development of evidence-based interventions for youngsters exhibiting delinquent behaviour is important (Kamerbrief Ontwikkelingen jeugdcriminaliteit 23 juni 2021; Kamerstukken II 28 741, nr. 85, 2021-2022). This entails attention to the development of a national homogeneous and effective methodology for youth probation, as well as greater understanding of the population with a youth probation measure – ensuring that the methodology aligns with the risk factors and needs of youth on probation.

The objective of youth probation is to prevent reoffending and to support youngsters between the ages of 12 and 23 years on their path towards recovery and a future free from delinquent behaviour (Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2017). To make youth probation future-proof, the project ‘Jeugdreclassering in Verbinding’ is developing a nationwide and uniform methodology for youth probation. In earlier studies on profiles of youngsters in the criminal justice system have not included youth on probation as a group (Van der Put & Stolwijk, 2022; Janssen-de Ruijter et al., 2021; Mulder et al., 2019; Mensink et al., 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to gain more insight into the profiles of youngsters with probation measure – along with assessing the suitability of current forms of supervision and guidance for this group. Mapping these profiles will contribute to the development of a national, homogeneous and effective methodology for youth probation.

This research had two objectives: (1) to identify profiles of risk and protective factors among youth with a probation measure and compare them with youngsters in the juvenile justice system who have not been placed under probation, and (2) to explore what forms of supervision and guidance are appropriate for the identified profiles within the current group of young probationers. This research comprised three different projects which are explained below.

Project I: Identifying and comparing profiles – a latent class analysis

In Project I, the following research questions were investigated: (1) Can distinguishable profiles be established among youth on probation based on risk and protective factors – scored using the Ritax, and (2) What are the differences and similarities between the profiles of risk and protective factors, as scored using the Ritax, among youngsters on probation and youngsters in the juvenile justice system without probation? By comparing youngsters with and without youth probation, differences and similarities

between these groups can be identified. In addition, it can be explored whether there are individuals on youth probation who share the same risk and protective factors as those not on youth probation.

Method Project I

Study population

Profiles were constructed using data from youngsters for whom a Ritax was completed between 2021 and 2022. The study population consisted of 7,862 unique youngsters aged 12 up to and including 17 years ($M = 15.5$; $SD = 1.3$). Of all the youngsters in the sample, 2,915 had been placed on youth probation (JR-group), while 4,947 youngsters had been investigated by the Child Protection Board (CPB). When referring to the JR-group in this study, it pertains to youngsters on probation. When referring to the CPB-group, it refers to youngsters without a juvenile probation measure and for whom the CPB conducted research on their development.

Instruments

The Ritax is part of the National set of instrumentation Juvenile Justice System (in Dutch: LIJ) and can be completed several times by different professionals within the juvenile justice system. The Ritax is a risk assessment instrument used to assess risk and protective factors of youngsters suspected of committing a crime (Buysse and Petersen, 2023). The basic version of the Ritax consists of 67 items divided into nine domains: family, school, work/leisure/finances, relationships, alcohol/drug use/gambling, mental health, attitude, aggression, and skills (Buysse and Petersen, 2023; Table 2).

The Ritax completed by youth probation officers includes all items from the basic version plus an additional 41 items. The additional questions provide a comprehensive inventory of dynamic factors influencing the risk of reoffending. The additional items in the Ritax cover the following domains: family, school, work/leisure/finances, relationships, attitude, aggression, and skills. The domains of mental health and alcohol, drug and gambling use do not have additional questions in the Ritax.

Procedure and analysis

For youngsters in the JR-group, the first Ritax questionnaire completed by a youth probation officer was selected. If a Ritax completed by youth probation officer was not available for a youngsters in the JR-group, the last Ritax with additional items completed by the CPB was used. For youngsters in the CPB-group, the first completed Ritax by the CPB was used.

Latent class analysis (LCA) was used to investigate whether there were distinguishable groups within the youth probation group. These groups, also known as profiles, were formed based on a selection of 25 Ritax items, each measuring a risk or protective factor. The following eight domains of the Ritax were included in the analysis: family, school, work/leisure/finances, relationships, mental health, attitude, aggression, and skills. The analysis aimed to determine whether different groups of youngsters exhibit the same combination of risk and protective factors on the Ritax. Youngsters with the same profile will have approximately the same pattern on risk and protective factors as measured by the Ritax, while youngsters with a different profile will have a different pattern.

Results Project I

The results indicate that a model with five classes, based on latent class test criteria and clinical interpretation, is the most suitable. These five classes can be broadly divided into two groups with a high-risk profile (Class 1 and Class 3), two groups of youngsters with a moderate-risk profile (Class 2 and Class 4), and one group of youngsters with a low-risk profile (Class 5). The five classes differ significantly from each other on the 25 selected Ritax items. The most significant difference between the five classes is in the mental health domain. Youngsters in Class 3 and Class 4 exhibit many risks in the mental health domain, whereas youngsters in Class 1, Class 2, and Class 5 have few risks in this domain. The following paragraphs provide a description of the five profiles. For each profile, characteristic features of youngsters in that profile are outlined.

High-risk profiles

Profile 1 "Youngsters with incapable parents and antisocial friends who are impulsive and easily influenced"

A quarter of youngsters under youth probation (n = 364) are classified into Profile 1. Youngsters in this profile show many risk factors across all domains of the Ritax. Parents appear to be incapable, youngsters place little or no importance to education, and they frequently skipping school. They have antisocial friends and engage in problematic leisure activities. Youngsters in Profile 1 often consume alcohol but use drugs less frequently than alcohol. They demonstrate many behavioural problems and hardly any mood problems. Incidents of domestic violence are rare, but they experienced violence outside the family. According to youth probation officers, they are proud of their antisocial behaviour and have little respect for authority figures. As stated by youth probation officers, youngsters in this profile are impulsive and easily influenced.

Profile 3 "Youngsters with an unsafe home environment, antisocial attitudes, drug use, and significant aggression problems"

Twenty percent of youngsters (n = 291) on youth probation are classified in the third profile. Youngsters in this profile show many risks across all domains of the Ritax. They face many problems at home: they experience domestic violence, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect. These youngsters often have a child protection measure. According to youth probation officers, youngsters in this profile find their own antisocial behaviour acceptable, have antisocial friends, and some are gang members. These youngsters do not always know right from wrong. They often resolve problems with both verbal and physical aggression and, according to youth probation officers, are more likely to perceive the behaviour and intentions of others as hostile rather than positive. Most youngsters in this profile use drugs, are hostile to authority figures, and are impulsive. Some youngsters in this profile experience mood

problems and suicidal thoughts, and some have recently or in the past deliberately harmed themselves. Additionally, their outlook on the future is often negative.

Moderate-risk profiles

Profile 2 "Youngsters with both prosocial and antisocial friends who take little or no responsibility for their behaviour"

Twenty-one percent of youngsters (n = 306) on youth probation are classified into the second profile. Youngsters in this profile score somewhat problematically on most Ritax domains. Parents are involved, set rules, and reward good behaviour. Youngsters in this profile show some degree of importance toward education and rarely skip school. They sometimes make cognitive errors and have some problems with their moral development. Youngsters in Profile 2 consume alcohol frequently but use drugs infrequently. There is hardly any indication of mental health problems, and they also have no experiences of emotional or physical abuse in the family.

Profile 4 "Youngsters with an unsafe home environment and mood problems who are motivated to change"

Eighteen percent of youngsters (n = 262) on youth probation are classified into the fourth profile. Youngsters in this profile have mood problems and sometimes experience suicidal thoughts. A few youngsters in this profile have deliberately harmed themselves in the past. Most youngsters in this profile use drugs, rarely drink alcohol, and show few externalising behavioural problems. Many youngsters in this profile experience both physical and verbal abuse and witness (or have witnessed) domestic violence. A large proportion of youngsters in this profile has a child protection measure. Youngsters in this profile score 'unknown' on many items of the Ritax. For example, it is often unknown whether they engage in problematic leisure activities and/or have antisocial friends, and it is unclear whether they are truant or not. It is possible that youngsters in this profile lack a supportive network, which is why little is known about such risk factors.

Low-risk profile

Profile 5 " Youngsters with severe alcohol problems who have a supportive network and many protective factors "

Sixteen percent of youngsters (n = 233) on youth probation are classified into the fifth profile. Youngsters in Profile 5 show few risks and have many protective factors. These youngsters usually live at home, and their parents/caregivers set rules to which the youngsters adhere. They attend school and rarely skip school. Youngsters in this profile have prosocial friends or both prosocial and antisocial friends and show few internalising and externalising behavioural problems. The main problem for these youngsters is substance use: a large proportion of youngsters in this profile use alcohol regularly.

Comparison between JR-group and CPB-group

The profiles identified in the youth probation (JR-group) were statistically compared with those in the Child Protection Board (CPB) group. Firstly, the analysis shows that five profiles are also found in the CPB-group. Subsequently, it was investigated whether the prevalence of the profiles between the JR-group and CPB-group was equal. In other words, whether the extent to which the profiles occur in the two groups is the same or different. Overall, youngsters with a juvenile probation measure have more risk factors than the CPB-group. Profile 3, "youngsters with severe risk factors and an unsafe home situation," is more common in the JR-group than the CPB-group. Youngsters for whom the insecure home situation is prominent and who have moderate risk factors (Profile 4) are more common in the CPB-group than the JR-group. It appears that when family problems are prominent, the CPB provides guidance (as in Profile 4), and when the behavioural problems of youngsters are prominent, the probation service provides supervision and guidance (as in Profile 3). This distinction is less clear for youngsters who do not experience an insecure home situation – regardless of the severity of their risk factors (Profile 1 and Profile 2). Youngsters in these two profiles are as common in the JR-group as in the CPB-group. This cannot be explained on the basis of the Ritax. It seems that other factors are important in determining the care and supervision a youngster needs when they do not experience problems in the home situation (as in Profile 1 and Profile 2).

Project II: Exploring appropriate forms of supervision and guidance – a literature review

In Project II, the following research questions were addressed: (1) What evidence-based interventions, targeting risk factors, can be applied by youth probation services? and (2) What is known about forms of supervision and guidance provided by youth probation services from (inter)national literature? To answer these research questions, the latest knowledge regarding evidence-based interventions for the target group of youth probation was synthesized. A literature review was conducted on interventions and effective elements of youth probation in relation to behaviour change and reducing reoffending among youngsters who have committed a criminal offense. A total of 26 studies were included, mainly from the United States, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, China, and Sweden. Studies were only included if they were in Dutch or English, focused on youngsters (aged 12-23) who committed criminal offenses, and included interventions that targeted criminogenic needs of the population or effective elements of youth probation practice.

The literature review revealed that various evidence-based interventions are effective for the target group of youth probation and are associated with behavioural change and recidivism reduction. Since the effects of interventions often target specific behaviours rather than a generic outcome such as recidivism reduction, the likelihood of actual recidivism reduction due to the intervention is smaller. By offering youngsters a combination of different interventions tailored to their risk factors and needs, increases the likelihood of intervention effectiveness. Consistent with the Risk-Need-Responsivity

(RNR) model and the literature, the following interventions are expected to be effective in reducing behavioural problems among youngsters under youth probation: aggression regulation training, cognitive-behavioural therapy, extrajudicial programs such as restorative justice, educational therapy, family therapy, mediation, mentoring and coaching, therapy focused on moral development, multisystemic therapy, parenting skills training, trauma-focused interventions, and (social) skills training.

Several studies describe the implementation or opinions of youth probation officers but not the effectiveness of the effective elements of youth probation. Only a limited number of studies have examined the effect of supervision and guidance by youth probation. Studies indicate that youth probation is more effective than imprisonment for young offenders who are first-time convicted. The literature also emphasises the importance of involving parents and family and of being responsive with the needs of youngsters. Furthermore, the skills of youth probation officers are found to influence effectiveness, with an empathetic and open attitude towards youngsters increasing motivation. Importantly, tailoring supervision to individual needs is a predictor of success, rather than the duration of the measure.

Project III: Consensus on appropriate forms of supervision and guidance for the identified profiles – a Delphi study

In Project III, the following two research questions were addressed: (1) To what extent does existing supervision and guidance align with the identified profiles? (2) What adjustments to current forms of supervision and guidance are desirable? These questions were investigated using a Delphi study. The Delphi method is a structured approach where the opinions of experts on a specific topic are surveyed, and they subsequently reach consensus on this topic.

In this research, an online Delphi study was used to achieve consensus among professionals on the desirability and necessity of adjustments to existing forms of supervision and guidance, as well as interventions carried out by youth probation officers. A total of 48 professionals, mainly youth probation officers and behavioural scientists from 12 different institutions executing youth probation measures, the so-called Certified Institutions (CIs), participated in the Delphi study. This means that 92% of the CIs were involved in the research, assuming that with a response rate of 85%, there was sufficient support for the research among the CIs. Some CIs had more participants than others (range of participants per CI: 1-14). Both CIs with urban and national coverage were represented. The average working experience of the professionals was 9.8 years (range 2 months to 26 years). In addition to these 45 professionals from the CIs, three professionals from other organizations also participated.

For each profile, professionals first indicated, with a multiple-choice question, what they considered to be the most appropriate form of current supervision and guidance. For this question, professionals could choose from the different supervision and guidance trajectories that are supervised by the youth probation officers. For profiles 2, 4, and 5, professionals agree that regular supervision and

guidance is the most appropriate. For Profile 1 and Profile 3, professionals disagree in their opinions on which form of supervision and guidance is appropriate. For Profile 1, half of the professionals indicate that regular supervision and guidance is appropriate, while 24% of the professionals think that some form of individual supervision programme is appropriate, and 15% Streetpower (in Dutch 'Straatkracht'). For Profile 3, almost 43% of the professionals say that intensive individual supervision programme by youth probation officers is desirable, and 32% say Streetpower (in Dutch 'Straatkracht').

In the Delphi study, professionals made statements for each profile, with an open question, about what they consider to be an appropriate approach to supervision and guidance for the youngsters in each profile. Professionals have a clear understanding of how supervision and guidance should be implemented for most profiles. Appropriate supervision for youngsters in Profile 1 "Youngsters with incapable parents and antisocial friends who are impulsive and susceptible" focuses on building an alliance with youngsters and identifying the problems, while providing insight into the consequences of their behaviour. According to professionals, severe risk factors of youngsters in Profile 1 should be addressed together with chain partners. Youngsters in Profile 2 "Youngsters with both prosocial and antisocial friends who take little or no responsibility for their behaviour" require a different form of supervision and guidance than those in Profile 1. According to youth probation officers, it is appropriate to approach youngsters in Profile 2 in a positive way, so that these youngsters are motivated to work on their future and their contribution to society.

For youngsters in Profile 3 "Youngsters with an unsafe home situation, antisocial attitude, and drug use who have severe aggression problems," professionals consider a wide range of supervision and guidance methods important for youth probation officers to use. In this way, professionals demonstrate the vulnerability and lack of skills of youngsters in Profile 3. It is important that supervision and guidance is constantly tailored to the specific risks and needs of youngsters. The appropriate form of supervision and guidance for youngsters in Profile 4 "Youngsters with an unsafe home situation and mood problems who are motivated to change" should focus on identifying problems and ensuring that a youth receives the right care and a safe place, now and in the future. Professionals point out that it is important for youngsters in Profile 4 to be informed about their own problems, but also about the probation process. It is important to do this in a positive way and to work on the alliance between youngsters and the youth probation officer.

Importantly, youngsters in Profile 5 "Youngsters with severe alcohol problems who have a supportive network and many protective factors" are aware of the risks associated with their problem behaviour and alcohol use. Professionals believe that the best way to help youngsters in Profile 5 is to approach them positively and thinking together with a young individual about the future.

Discussion and Recommendations

In this study, five relevant and distinguishable profiles were identified, providing more insight into the target group of youth probation. Within this target group, there are youngsters who share similar risk and protective factors. In this study, two high-risk profiles, two moderate-risk profiles, and one low-risk profile were identified. The profiles, and the corresponding forms of supervision and guidance found in this study, should not lead to a 'cookbook' approach where only the profiles are considered. Expert professionals and adherence to a national and homogeneous approach are essential. It is important that supervision and guidance is tailored to the individual needs of a youngster. Each youngster is unique, requiring a fresh assessment of their personal situation each time. Tailoring supervision and guidance to the individual needs of a youngster takes time. It is important to invest in ensuring that youth probation officers have sufficient time and space to address the individual needs and risks of a youngster.

In this study, professionals provided their opinions on appropriate supervision and guidance for youngsters with different profiles. Professionals indicated that it is important for supervision and guidance to be scalable and downgraded during the process. Furthermore, the Delphi study revealed that professionals miss an intermediate step between regular supervision and intensive supervision and guidance. While this intermediate step could lead to a more person-centred approach that better meets the needs of youngsters. The better the probation measure is tailored to a youngster's needs, the greater the chance of successfully completing the process. Therefore, it is important to develop an intermediate step between regular supervision and intensive supervision and guidance. In this study, professionals also indicated in the Delphi study that they would like to provide some form of supervision and guidance to youngsters and families at an earlier stage, which is not currently possible. They consider it important to be able to invest time and energy in youngsters if they are at risk of drifting into crime or organised crime, including the National Prevention Program with Authority (in Dutch Nationaal Programma Preventie met Gezag) or Youth Work for 'the 2%' (De Jong, 2023). It is therefore important to pay more attention to an individual preventive form of supervision and guidance.

The results of this study show that there are two profiles (Profile 3 and Profile 4) where youngsters score high on the mental health domain and mental health care is necessary. Both groups benefit from appropriate and intensive care that provides the right mental health care. At present, these youngsters are sometimes 'stuck' in youth probation, and mental health care seems to start slowly, preventing timely work on risk factors. Therefore, it is relevant to develop a youth probation program that strengthens the collaboration between care and youth probation supervision so that youngsters with mental health problems receive the right mental health care as soon as possible.

Based on our research, we see two opportunities for an effective approach to juvenile crime. The first is to continue to develop and improve the Ritax and ensure ongoing training. The added value of the Ritax is that it systematically assesses risk and protective factors to map the risk of reoffending. Moreover, the Ritax can be used to develop appropriate interventions tailored to the risk profile of youngsters. However, the Ritax is only of value to the juvenile justice system if it is used nationally and

structurally. This also requires a complete and thorough completion of the Ritax. When the Ritax is not fully completed, and there are many missing data, this can distort the dynamic risk profile of a youngster. For future research on the Ritax, it is important that: (1) there is a systematic implementation of the Ritax, (2) the Ritax is fully and carefully completed, (3) online behaviour is more extensively taken into account, (4) new research is conducted on the inter-rater reliability of the Ritax, and (5) more attention is paid to the implementation of the new items of the Ritax. Second, the further development of existing and recognised behavioural interventions. As mentioned earlier, there are two high-risk profiles, two moderate-risk profiles, and one low-risk profile. Youngsters in the different profiles show a different scoring pattern on the Ritax. So, there are differences between these profiles in terms of risk factors and protective factors, but also in the severity of these risk factors. Youngsters in the different profiles therefore have different needs when it comes to supervision and guidance (and behavioural interventions). Therefore, it is important to study which forms of supervision and guidance and recognized behavioural interventions best meet the needs of youngsters.

In conclusion, the target group of youth probation has been carefully mapped and, together with professionals, it has been assessed whether the current forms of supervision and guidance align with this target group. In the project 'Jeugdreclassering in Verbinding', efforts are being made to develop a 'menu' for a nationally homogeneous methodology with an accompanying overview of modalities and measures. This will further improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the approach to youth delinquency.

Based on this research, we have come to the following recommendations. We believe that these recommendations will contribute to an effective approach to youth crime, better care for offenders, and more satisfied professionals. It is also important to look critically at current policies. Improving the approach and services of youth probation are only meaningful if policy-makers also critically reflect on the policies they have (previously) implemented (*cf.* Stellaard, 2023).

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Investing in time and space for youth probation officers is crucial, in this way they have ample of time to tailor youth probation interventions to youth risk factors and needs.

Professionals have sufficient knowledge and skills to provide tailored supervision and guidance, with the identified profiles providing guidance and the developing the national homogeneous probation methodology and menu being used. It is essential that professionals have sufficient time and space to ensure that supervision and guidance meet the needs of youngsters.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Develop a guidance variant that provides an intermediate step between regular forms of supervision and guidance and more intensive individual trajectory guidance to allow for more flexibility in the intensity of supervision and guidance.

Professionals need differentiation in supervision and guidance, particularly an intermediate step between regular and intensive supervision. This will result in better alignment with the needs of youngsters, thereby increasing the likelihood of successfully completing youth probation.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Pay attention to a more individualised, preventive supervision and guidance trajectory, looking at how to prevent youngsters from committing (serious) crimes at an earlier stage. .

Professionals want to be able to provide a form of supervision and guidance at an earlier stage in the juvenile justice system. It is important to be able to invest time and energy in youth if they are at risk of drifting towards criminality or organised crime, including the National Prevention Program with Authority. The intensity of the measure should be tailored to the risk profile of a youngster. By providing youngsters with the right help as soon as possible, further problems can potentially be prevented.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Develop an intensive mental health care supervision and guidance trajectory where youngsters can get the right mental health care quickly and where there is good collaboration between youth probation and mental health care.

Collaboration between youth probation and mental health care needs to be strengthened, especially for youngsters with mental health problems. To improve the flow to mental health care institutions and solve waiting list problems, it is imperative that policy measures are implemented. One such measure is the youth care obligation proposed in the Youth Reform Agenda 2023-2028.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Make full and effective use of the Ritax. The added value of the Ritax is that it systematically assesses risk and protective factors in different areas of life to map the risk of reoffending.

By properly (continuously) training youth probation officers and further developing the Ritax – so that the scoring better aligns – the reliability and added value of the Ritax are increased. It is important that the Ritax is used nationally as agreed and that exceptions are not accepted.