



# Juvenile suspects in sharper focus?

A feasibility study to determine whether the Ritax (risk assessment) data obtained from the National Screening and Risk Assessment Instrument for Juvenile Offences are sufficiently reliable to allow comparisons over time

## Summary

*Cahier 2025-12*

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**Cahier**

De reeks Cahier omvat de rapporten van onderzoek dat door en in opdracht van het Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Datacentrum is verricht. Opname in de reeks betekent niet dat de inhoud van de rapporten het standpunt van de Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid weergeeft.

## Summary

### Juvenile suspects in sharper focus?

A feasibility study to determine whether the Ritax (risk assessment) data obtained from the National Screening and Risk Assessment Instrument for Juvenile Offences are sufficiently reliable to allow comparisons over time

This feasibility study investigates the extent to which Ritax data from the Dutch Child Protection Board, which are part of the National Screening and Risk Assessment Instrument in the Juvenile Justice System (Landelijk Instrumentarium Jeugstrafrechtketen), are suitable for investigating changes in the characteristics of juvenile suspects over time. For example, as a supplementary source of data for the Juvenile Crime Monitor (JCM), which examines trends in juvenile crime every two years. The national police records that are available provide little information about the characteristics of juvenile suspects, such as relevant risk and protective factors that affect the incidence of delinquent behaviour. Although self-reported data, as measured in the Self-Reported Juvenile Delinquency Monitor, do provide this information, they focus on general populations. The Ritax data could potentially fill this gap for all juvenile suspects because of the screening for risk and protective factors that may play a role in either preventing criminality or promoting reoffending, as the case may be. However, it is not known how consistently the Ritax data are recorded nationwide and over time (information that would be necessary if comparisons are to be made over time). Such information is essential if statements are to be made about changes in the characteristics of juvenile suspects over time (or about differences between groups). This study has therefore focused on the extent to which the Ritax data can be used for comparisons over time of juvenile suspects at group and population level. This concerns the reliability of the Ritax data in terms of the manner in which these data were entered in the recording systems available nationwide and the completeness of the data.

A mixed-methods study was conducted to gauge the reliability and usability of the Ritax data. First, a literature study was carried out to determine what was already known from previous studies about the design, reliability and usability of the National Screening and Risk Assessment Instrument for Juvenile Offences (LIJ) in general and the Ritax data in particular. Next, the method of collecting and entering Ritax data and determining their usability in practice was examined through qualitative expert interviews and focus groups with child welfare investigators, policy officers and professional practitioners. Third, quantitative analyses of anonymised Ritax datasets were conducted to assess the entry and completeness of recorded data at item level for the years 2022 and 2023. This combination of methods yielded information about substantive and practical changes to the Ritax data over time. It also revealed patterns of missing data and variations in data recording between domains and subgroups. In addition, two focus groups were set up to discuss a data governance issue, namely whether Ritax data, if deemed sufficiently useful, could be made systematically available to the Research and Data Centre (WODC) at micro level and, if so, what would be necessary for this purpose.

The results of the qualitative analysis show that the consistency of Ritax registrations over time appears to be limited. Substantive changes to the instrument, such as the introduction of Ritax 2.0 in 2022, have resulted in a methodological break. This makes it difficult to compare data from before and after this date. Data from the date of introduction of Ritax 2.0 onwards might possibly be suitable for investigating changes over time. However, the interviews and focus groups revealed that in practice there are regional differences in the methods used to collect the Ritax data, and it is not clear whether these differences are consistent over time. This regional variation in the way Ritax data are recorded and the changes in the data over time limit its usefulness for the purpose of researching comparisons between regions and subgroups and changes in the characteristics of juvenile suspects over time. Moreover, the quantitative analyses of the subgroups revealed that the extent to which values were missing for some items differed significantly by gender, age and collection region.

A finding based on the quantitative analyses was that the Ritax data were not always fully entered, given the number of 'unknown' scores. Given the relatively large number of 'unknown' scores within the domains of family, attitudes and relationships, the extent to which the risk and protective factors within these domains are useful for research purposes is debatable. Although the proportion of missing values was slightly lower in 2023 than in 2022, consideration must be given to the possible selectivity in the Ritax data. In view of the differences in missing values for gender, age and region, the data are incomplete. This affects the representativeness of the data and limits the possibility of making comparisons over time. Data from one year or region might mostly relate to a specific subpopulation, while data from another year or region might focus on a different one. Possible shifts of this kind in the underlying population make it more difficult to interpret trends. Such selectivity can be assessed only by linking Ritax data at micro level to an external source comprising the entire population of juvenile suspects (or juvenile offenders).

Moreover, an analysis of demographic characteristics showed that age, gender, gravity of offence and regional distribution remained largely unchanged over the years 2022 and 2023. The majority of the data concern youths (approximately 90%), with a mean age of 15.4 years. As only two years were compared and there were a significant number of missing values, few conclusions can be drawn about changes in the gravity of offences.

As regards the data governance issue, it was apparent from the focus groups that, legally and technically, there are ways in which Ritax data could be provided systematically at micro level to the Research and Data Centre (WODC). As yet, there is no ongoing, substantive requirement under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) that would warrant a systematic exchange of such data at micro level. The systematic provision of data would also require significant personnel and material capacity, security measures and clear agreements between the parties involved. At present, there is insufficient need for this.

This feasibility study has a few limitations and also offers a basis for follow-up. As the empirical analyses cover only two recent years, they shed no light on changes over the longer term. Moreover, as it remains unclear how the selection of the young people about whom Ritax data were recorded took place, the extent to which the data on juvenile suspects are representative is uncertain. As this study has been unable to clarify why a significant proportion of the variables are scored as 'unknown', the causes of these missing values are unclear. However, qualitative findings point to

variations in the collection of data and difficulty in obtaining information for certain items. Nevertheless, this study offers a valuable basis for further research. For the first time, there is information about the extent to which the Ritax data are consistent and complete at the national level and where differences exist between domains, regions and subgroups. If the reliability and hence the usability of the Ritax data improves in the future, these data can contribute to evaluation research, subgroup comparisons and interpretation of trends in juvenile delinquency.

All things considered, it is apparent from this feasibility study that at present there is not sufficient justification for using Ritax data *systematically* for periodic research into changes over time in the background characteristics of the total population of juvenile suspects and regional and subgroup variation within that population. In other words, it would not currently be advisable to use these data for biennial monitoring such as in the JCM. At this stage, there is too much variation in the manner in which data are recorded and entered to make reliable comparisons. If their quality is improved, Ritax data could eventually become a reliable source for such research purposes. To improve the quality and usability of Ritax data, it is particularly important to reduce the number of 'unknown' scores in domains with many missing values. Consideration could be given to achieving greater uniformity in data collection and recording procedures in practice. Naturally, allowance must be made for the fact that child welfare investigators can exercise a degree of discretion that enables them to tailor individual investigations as needed. Moreover, systematic documentation of substantive changes to the instrument is essential in order to identify potential future methodological breaks. Training of child welfare investigators and stricter national coordination of data recording guidelines could help to generate more consistent and reliable data capable of being used in investigating changes in the population of juvenile suspects over time.

The use of multi-year Ritax data for ad hoc research into changes in the background characteristics of juvenile suspects or offenders over time would seem feasible, provided attention is paid to the limitations described in this study. However, careful consideration should be given in the design of the research to how to take account of the extent of missing values and how this affects the conclusions that may be drawn from the data. In order to limit the selectivity of the information and to be able to make statements about the population of juvenile suspects, a link is needed at micro level to an external source in which data about the entire population of juvenile suspects or offenders are available (for example, the police records at Statistics Netherlands (CBS) or the Research and Policy Database for Judicial Documentation (OBJD) at the Research and Data Centre (WODC).

Het Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Datacentrum (WODC), Kennisinstituut voor de rechtsstaat, is een onafhankelijk kennisinstituut dat valt onder het ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid. Het WODC draagt bij aan behoud en verbetering van de rechtsstaat via het (laten) uitvoeren van kwalitatief hoog wetenschappelijk onderzoek. En door het aanbieden van gevraagde en ongevraagde kennis, verbeterpunten en (waar mogelijk) denkrichtingen.

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