

# Summary

## The Stop-reaction

### An evaluation of the intervention theory

#### *Introduction*

In the Netherlands, children under the age of twelve cannot be prosecuted. The report by the 'Montfrans Committee' published in 1994, led to more attention given to delinquent behaviour amongst children under the age of twelve. In 1997, the memo 'Children and criminality' by the Dutch Ministry of Justice was published, in which is recommended to develop an approach equivalent to the Halt procedure for children under twelve who are guilty of committing minor offences. This recommendation resulted in a preventive intervention called the 'Stop-reaction'. The Stop-reaction is a voluntary offer for parents and their children under the age of twelve who have been found guilty of minor punishable offences.

In 2001, the Stop-reaction was introduced nationally. Since 2005 a uniform nationwide working method has been introduced, which is laid down in the Stop-reaction handbook. Since the uniform methods were introduced nothing is known about the effectiveness of the Stop-reaction. The Judicial Youth Policy Department of the Ministry of Justice requested the WODC to perform an evaluation of the Stop-reaction.<sup>15</sup>

The general objective of the Stop-reaction is to prevent a starting criminal career, e.g. to reduce recidivism. More specifically the aim is to positively change the attitude and behaviour of the children. In the Netherlands, children under the age of twelve cannot be prosecuted due to their age. That's why there is no formal punishment to criminal behaviour, and the Stop-reaction can be considered as a response inbetween criminal law and youth care. Therefore the evaluation was conducted from two perspectives. The first perspective is that of an 'evaluation chain' of judicial interventions of offenders. The second is that of an evaluation in a youth care context with regard to the effectiveness of youth interventions. Both of these perspectives start from the What Works criteria for effective interventions and both perspectives complement each other. An evaluation chain for offender interventions consists of a plan evaluation, a process evaluation, and an effect evaluation. The 'plan evaluation' provides insight into the intervention theory, whilst the 'process evaluation' helps to provide an understanding of the procedural manner in which the intervention is carried out. If both evaluations show that the necessary preconditions have been met, the effectiveness of the intervention can be examined in terms of reducing recidivism.

This part of the study is restricted to the plan evaluation of the Stop-reaction. The findings are tested against an 'effectiveness ladder' adopted from youth care. With this ladder it is possible to determine whether the Stop-reaction can be 'potentially effective' (the first step) or 'promising' (the second step). The

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<sup>15</sup> This summary does not contain literary references, see the report for such references.

study is in line with so-called 'practice-based effect research' into youth interventions.

In this report the findings of the plan evaluation are presented. The aim is to investigate the intervention theory of the Stop-reaction. Our research question is 'to what extent can the Stop-reaction be considered as an effective intervention for the target group (children under the age of twelve), taking into account the general objective (reducing recidivism) and the specific aims (promoting awareness and behavioural change by the juvenile, support parents, and signal psychosocial problems)'.

The specific questions are derived from the What Works criteria for interventions. The following aspects are examined:

- The extent to what the aims and target group are carefully defined.
- The particular risk factors and protective factors targeted by the intervention.
- The intervention model used for behavioural change, the risk and protective factors focussed on, and the theoretical or empirical basis of the intervention.
- The availability of a clear working method.

#### *Investigative methods*

For the evaluation we used qualitative research methods. This involved studying all available literature on the Stop-reaction, holding semi-structured interviews with policy workers at Halt-Nederland and sending out a digital questionnaire to all 42 Halt offices (a response rate of almost 90%). Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were held with employees at 20 Halt offices in order to gain a deeper insight into the information provided in the digital questionnaires. The information from these digital questionnaires is not utilised in this plan evaluation as there is considerable overlap with the interviews, which also offer more in-depth information.

#### *Results*

The Stop-reaction meets a few aspects of the general working factors for interventions, but in certain essential areas the What Works criteria are not fulfilled. In particular with regard to their theoretical and empirical basis, the Stop-reaction has insufficient foundations in terms of an empirically or theoretically based model for (behavioural or attitudinal) change and is insufficiently focused upon risk and protective factors.

#### **I Target group and aims**

The Stop-reaction is aimed at children under the age of twelve. The handbook states that there is no lower age limit, but in the case of a child being under the age of eight, the Stop-reaction is only carried out with the child's parents. According to the handbook the overall objective is to 'reduce recidivism'. This objective is specified in the form of specific aims, such as 'parenting support', 'a signalling role to locate children with psychosocial problems' and 'stimulate behavioural change'. The experts do not fully support these aims. More specifically the objective reducing recidivism is not supported. The majority of the experts do have their expectations with regard to the specific aims of 'parenting

support', 'promoting awareness to the child' and 'location'. In practice, the aims are not measured although some experts consider them capable of being measured.

## II Theoretical basis

The Stop-reaction handbook states that a reduction in recidivism is achieved by fulfilling four specific aims, but the handbook hardly addresses the question as to 'why' the Stop-reaction should work. In the handbook a number of general scientifically based assumptions is described regarding the relationship between specific aims and delinquency, but no answer is given to e.g. what the working components of the intervention are, on what risk and protective factors is focussed on, and what's the empirical basis of the utilised materials. The Stop-reaction is not an evidence based intervention with a sound theoretical and empirical base. According to the experts, the Stop-reaction has primarily been developed in practice.

## III Working methods and approach

The working methods for the Stop-reaction are described in detail in the handbook. The experts however do state that in order to truly address the problem and bring about real change within the juvenile, more time should be spend and improved methods are necessary. The current methods are inadequate for the purposes of achieving behavioural change and/or reducing recidivism.

### *Conclusions*

In order to determine the effectiveness of the Stop-reaction, we examined to what extent the reaction meets the What Works criteria for effective interventions. According to these criteria a clear definition of the target group and aims is necessary, just as a theoretical and empirical based model for (behavioural or attitudinal) change, a description of the risk and protective factors that is focussed on, and a clear working method for practitioners executing the intervention. Given the results of our study into the intervention theory, we conclude that the Stop-reaction cannot be considered as 'promising' intervention for reducing recidivism. This because of a current lack of an explicitly defined model for (behavioural or attitudinal) change that is fundamental to the intervention as a whole. At best, the Stop-reaction can be considered 'potentially effective' as the target group and the aims of the interventions are defined, together with the working method for practitioners. However, the following essential remarks must be made:

- The uncertainties about the target group demand a closer description and should be investigated with more in depth in the process evaluation.
- The general objective of reducing recidivism, and the specific aim of behavioural change can not be targetted with this minimal intervention. Moreover, it is not clear whether or not the Stop-reaction is pointed at risk factors that increase the chance of delinquency and protective factors that reduce this chance amongst children under the age of twelve. An evidence based model for behavioural or attitudinal change (theoretically based and empirically founded) which clarifies how the aims and sub aims can be achieved, is also lacking.
- The learning material used for the Stop-reaction is clearly described, but the lack of a theoretical or empirical basis means that it's nevertheless unclear

as to whether this is effective in achieving the aims. In addition, experts have stated that the material that is available is not sufficient to be able to effectively tackle the risk factors within the timeframe that the Stop-reaction provides.

Questioning the general aim of 'reducing recidivism' and the specific aim of 'behavioural change' raises the question as to whether the other aims of the Stop-reaction ('parenting support', and 'a signalling role') are appropriate as part of a preventative approach. In this regard, we can conclude that the specific aims do in fact correspond to the aims of a preventative (non-judicial) youth intervention, namely 'providing information', 'signalling', 'referral', 'minor pedagogical assistance' and 'care coordination'. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the Stop-reaction can be defined as a potentially effective youth intervention. Irrespective of whether the Stop-reaction can be interpreted as a behavioural intervention for young offenders or as a preventive intervention, the general working criteria for an effective intervention remain the same. This means that even if the Stop-reaction is considered to be a preventative intervention, a theoretical and empirical basis is required before any further statements on the reaction's effectiveness can be made.

#### *Discussion*

We conclude that both policy and practitioners should, in the first instance, consider the precise aim of the Stop-reaction. Is it solely a reaction from society in response to offences committed by a child under the age of twelve, or is it intended to prevent reoffending in the future by means of (preventive) intervention? It has become apparent, that for the time being, preventing recidivism and effecting behavioural change is still not possible within the Stop-reaction, because of the lack of time and resources and the lack of theoretical basis.

If the intention is to implement an intervention for delinquents under the age of twelve as a form of preventive intervention, it is clear that 'evidence based' findings are to be used. Regardless of which aim one intends to achieve, it is necessary for the purposes of evaluating the effectiveness of a (preventive) intervention, to formulate a thorough theoretical and empirical basis. In this description a model for change should be clarified together with those influencing factors that are being addressed for the intended target group. A firm basis for this can be found in national and international literature about preventative interventions concerning children under the age of twelve. However, it should be noted that national and international literature states that the impact of risk factors and protective factors on antisocial and delinquent behaviour may differ according to the stage of development. In other words, an intervention that appears successful with one age group may not necessarily achieve the same level of success when implemented in another age group.