Summary

Juvenile offenders and their adjustment to imprisonment

A study of adjustment to imprisonment among juvenile offenders in correctional institutions

Introduction

In the past years, judicial youth policy has been aimed towards realising large adjustments to the care provided by the juvenile offenders’ institutions to detained young people. This was accompanied by major changes in the organisational structure and in the methodology of juvenile offenders’ institutions. In this context, more attention has been paid to the fact that with regard to the reaction of young people to a sanction the focus should not only be on recidivism after imprisonment, but should, among other things, also be on how juvenile offenders adjust to imprisonment and on their behaviour during imprisonment. The central idea is that the experienced adjustment to imprisonment has an influence on both the security in the institution as well as on the effectiveness of the sanction and, as a result of this, ultimately also on recidivism. Especially since every year approximately 4,000 criminal cases against juvenile offenders are settled by an imprisonment and since in the past few years much attention has been paid to improving the quality of the care facilities in juvenile offenders’ institutions, it is important to the Judicial Youth Policy Department (DJI) of the Ministry of Security and Justice and the Dutch National Agency of Correctional Institutions (DJI) of the Ministry of Security and Justice to identify how young people experience their adjustment to imprisonment, how they cope with imprisonment, and whether there are differences among young people in the way in which they deal with the deprivation of liberty.

Also from a scientific point of few, it is relevant to examine how young people experience the adjustment to imprisonment. Although coping with imprisonment or the adjustment to imprisonment has been subject of many scientific studies since the nineteen fifties, these were primarily Anglo-Saxon studies among adult detainees. These studies focused on the adaptation to imprisonment, with the basic assumption being that inadequate adaptation to imprisonment is in particular related to or results in rule-violating behaviour on the one hand, or to withdrawn behaviour on the other hand. Research into adaptation to imprisonment has focused on many aspects of coping with imprisonment, including, for instance, the deprivation of autonomy, perceived fear and safety, stress and wellbeing during the period of imprisonment, the psychosocial functioning of detainees and their (mis)behaviour during imprisonment. In line with the literature, in this study we will also examine the way in which young people deal with imprisonment on the basis of different outcome measures.
Existing literature distinguishes between two possible models to explain the adjustment to imprisonment. These two models have been used often in studies that focus on imprisonment in the past years. First, the deprivation model assumes that the adjustment to imprisonment may largely be explained by characteristics of the correctional institution itself. On the other hand, the importation model proposes that the way in which detainees adjust to imprisonment can be primarily explained by the characteristics of the individual offender/prisoner. Recent literature shows that both import and deprivation characteristics are of importance in explaining the adjustment to imprisonment. In the present study, we take into account a combined import- and deprivation perspective.

Research questions

In the present study we distinguish between the following research questions:

- How do juvenile offenders in correctional institutions (on the basis of pre-trial detention or juvenile detention) experience various practical, social, and psychological aspects of the adjustment to imprisonment?
- What are the relationships between the import and deprivation characteristics on the one hand and the adjustment to imprisonment on the other hand?
- What is the relationship between the attitude towards committing offences, adjustment to imprisonment, and the characteristics of the correctional institution?

With regard to the first two research questions, we will also examine to what extent the relationships apply in general or whether there are differences among subgroups. In this context, we will examine possible differences based on demographic information (gender, age, and ethnic origin), criminal history (previous detention experiences and period of imprisonment), and indications for serious psychiatric problems.

Research Method

Data

We applied a multi-method approach by gathering information from multiple sources (self-reports, staff reports, file data, and official record data) and by using different research methods (quantitative and qualitative).
Sample

The basic sample of this study consisted of a survey among 207 juvenile offenders in pre-trial detention or juvenile detention who were incarcerated in juvenile offenders’ institutions. With regard to these juvenile offenders, we also retrieved information about their offences from the TULP\textsuperscript{16} registration system, if available. In addition, we obtained consent from 173 young people to examine their institutional files. As far as the inspected files contained any information, they provided information on psychiatric problems (screening instruments upon arrival) and on the (mis)behaviour of the juvenile offenders (incident registration). Semi-structured interviews were held with 38 young people, which dealt more extensively with the central themes of the study. Questionnaires were administered to 33 staff members of this subgroup of juveniles. This means that we were able to use a broad range of sources and methods in order to provide answers to the research questions.

Concepts

In the present study we examined five aspects of the way in which young people \textit{adjust to imprisonment}, namely: perceived safety, autonomy, well-being/stress, self-reported psychosocial functioning, and (mis)behaviour (on the basis of the above-mentioned incidents registered during imprisonment). In order to predict how juvenile offenders adjust to imprisonment, we took into account both import and deprivation characteristics. We included various deprivation characteristics in the study, such as the perceived rule enforcement and experienced fairness and justice of rules, perceived knowledge of rules and rights, perceived quality of the daily activity programme and the perceived quality of the educational programme in the institution. Interaction with staff was also taken into account (both the relationship with staff and the experienced treatment by staff), as well as the interaction with fellow group members. The import characteristics used were the usual demographic characteristics mentioned earlier (gender, age and origin), the characteristics of the criminal career history, and possible psychological and psychiatric problems reported at the beginning of the imprisonment.

In order to answer the research questions, we used information from multiple sources and, as stated above, different analytical strategies and methods. The adjustment to imprisonment was mainly measured by using self-reported data.
Results

In the report, we will discuss the results of five aspects of the adjustment to imprisonment (subsequently: perceived safety – Chapter 4, autonomy – Chapter 5, wellbeing/stress – Chapter 6, psychosocial functioning – Chapter 7, and (mis)behaviour in imprisonment – Chapter 8) in separate chapters. Another separate chapter was added at the special request of the Judicial Youth Policy Department (DJJ) in which the attitude towards the offence will be discussed (Chapter 9). In this summary, we will describe the findings on the basis of the research questions formulated above.

Research question 1: How do juvenile offenders in juvenile correctional institutions (on the basis of pre-trial detention or juvenile detention) experience various practical, social, and psychological aspects of the adjustment to imprisonment?

Safety, autonomy and wellbeing/stress

The results of the current study show that the young offenders reported predominantly in a positive way on their safety, autonomy, and their wellbeing during their stay in a juvenile offenders’ institution. This corresponds with findings from other recent studies into the situation of young detainees in the Netherlands, such as the annual evaluative report by DJI among juvenile delinquents and diverse reports of the different inspectorates. On the basis of the results of this study it seems, however, justified to somewhat be more nuanced about the perceived safety, autonomy, wellbeing, and the stress experienced by young people in juvenile offenders’ institutions.

The juvenile offenders in the present study predominantly reported high levels of safety in the Juvenile offenders’ institutions. This may be a matter of what is referred to in the literature as the ‘safety paradox’: prisoners report to feel safe in a relatively unsafe environment. Perceived safety does not only depend on the safety that is provided by the institution, from the present study it becomes clear that it is similarly important that detainees succeed in creating this feeling of safety themselves. Mainly the results of the analysis of interview data, Most juvenile offenders stated they have the idea that they create that safety themselves by their attitude towards others (both to their fellow group members as well as to the staff) in the residential group, and that they asserted themselves when necessary.

Furthermore, the juvenile offenders in the present study were relatively positive about the autonomy granted to them in the institutions. It should be noted in this context that this concerns in particular the degree of having a say in, for instance, becoming a member of a youth council in which they can express complaints. However, these measures only reflect a single aspect of autonomy. Again from interview data it becomes clear that several juvenile
offenders indicated that they had found it hard to deal with the limited freedom of action compared to their situation prior to imprisonment, although they gradually appeared to get used to the deprivation of liberty. Although limited control is inherent to imprisonment, the absence of perceived control may constitute a risk as well. The literature shows that loss of control may have adverse consequences for the motivation to participate in treatment programmes. However, not all juvenile offenders in the present study experienced the absence of control as negative. Some juvenile offenders actually appeared to experience the structure of life in the juvenile offenders’ institution in the long run as pleasant. It is possible that this applied in particular to those juvenile offenders who were lacking any structure in their daily lives and for whom this structure was being restored fully while they were staying in the institution. This is only a possible explanation that cannot be concluded directly from our findings since we did not include information on the situation of those juvenile offenders prior to imprisonment.

The juvenile offenders furthermore indicated experiencing a high degree of wellbeing (and thus only low levels of stress). In retrospect, they stated that they did experience more stress at the beginning of their stay; according to the juvenile offenders, this was also a period in which they experienced lower levels of safety. These results also correspond with the literature: the initial period of deprivation of liberty is generally perceived as stressful. This may be explained by the fact that, at the beginning, the juvenile offenders are unfamiliar with the situation, there is a lack of clarity about their stay in the correctional institution, and there is uncertainty about the criminal proceedings, which factors may be counted as the well-known ‘pains of imprisonment’. The juvenile offenders furthermore indicated during the interviews that the stress they experienced during their stay was primarily situational. Specific situations during the imprisonment may cause a higher degree of stress, for instance, when there is news about progress of the judicial proceedings or if there has been contact with family members.

From the survey data it became clear that the juvenile offenders reported positively on their safety, autonomy, and wellbeing in the juvenile offenders’ institutions.

However, from the interview data it became clear that some juvenile offenders stated that this feeling of safety is a result of their attempts to create their own safety, for instance, by engaging in tactical friendships.

Some juvenile offenders also experienced unsafe situations in the institution which are characterised by the fact that these situations were concealed from supervision by the supervisory team.

The interview data furthermore showed that some juvenile offenders experienced the deprivation of freedom as stressful, but that they had been able to get used to it gradually. Some juvenile offenders indicated experiencing the structure provided in the institution as pleasant.
– From the interview data it became clear that several juvenile offenders experienced the initial period in imprisonment as stressful.
– In addition, it became clear that feelings of stress were rather situational; sometimes, this was contact with home, other stressful moments were for instance when there was news about the progress of their criminal proceedings.

**Psychosocial functioning and misbehaviours**

On the basis of self-reported psychosocial problems (measured by the Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire (SDQ)), we found relatively few young people with clinical levels of psychosocial problems. This does not correspond with some other studies among juveniles in judicial settings. This may be a matter of under-reporting on this self-report survey possibly due to the fact that because they might insufficiently capable of assessing their own problems. It is also possible that the instruments that were used are less suitable for identifying the problems of juveniles in a juvenile offenders’ institution: however, we cannot conclude this on the basis of the current study and this must consequently be shown by further research. The difference with the existing literature on the basis of SDQ may, however, also be caused by the fact that previous studies primarily measured internalising and externalising problems separately, whereas in our study we used an overall scale for psychosocial problems. Finally, we examined the misbehaviours of young people in the Juvenile offenders’ institutions on the basis of incidents registered during the stay of the juvenile offenders in the juvenile offenders’ institution. Nearly every juvenile offender had violated a rule once. This varied from violating group rules or substance abuse to physical aggression towards group members or the members of the staff. A small group of juvenile offenders in our basic sample (approximately 30% of the total sample) had used physical or verbal violence relatively often as was evident from the combined data from the files and the official registration (TULP/JJI).

– Relatively few juvenile offenders reported serious psychosocial problems (approximately 11%).
– Although most juvenile offenders violated a rule once in a while, only a small group (30%) used physical or verbal violence frequently.

**Social and practical deprivation characteristics**

Juvenile offenders reported on their stay in a predominantly positive way. In particular, the interaction with group members (fellow group members) and group staff members (relationship with staff members and treatment by staff members) were regarded as being positive. In this context, the juvenile
offenders who had been detained for a relatively short period at the time of the administration of the surveys were more positive than the young people who had been detained for a longer period of time. The educational and daily activity programme were both judged less positively.

- Juvenile offenders were predominantly positive about social and practical aspects of their stay in the juvenile offenders’ institutions; the juvenile offenders who had been detained for a shorter period of time were more positive than the young people who had been detained for a longer period of time at the time of the administration of survey.

**Differences among subgroups**

In order to examine whether the adjustment to imprisonment applied to juvenile offenders in general, or whether the adjustment is specific to certain groups of juvenile offenders, we examined possible differences by background characteristics (gender, age, and origin), criminal history, or psychiatric problems. It appeared that psychological aspects of adjustment to imprisonment did not differ across the subgroups. It is possible that the small sample sizes in the subgroups caused the absence of significant differences, however, the majority of the findings correspond with the literature, and in particular with the international literature on this subject.

Gender differences were found in the level of psychosocial problems and in the amount of registered misbehaviours. Fewer boys than girls reported psychosocial problems. On the other hand, aggressive incidents had been registered more frequently during the stay in the correctional institution of boys than girls. These findings correspond with the well-known ‘gender-paradox’: fewer girls than boys committed offences, whereas girl offenders suffered from more psychological problems than boys.

Significant differences were also found in the number of incidents (of misbehaviour) in groups based on ethnic origin. Results showed that Antillean and Surinam juvenile offenders more often had aggression-related incidents registered in their files during imprisonment than juvenile offenders from other origin groups. In line with the literature, the results of the study also showed that native Dutch young people reported psychosocial problems more frequently than young people from other origin groups. This may point to the fact that psychosocial problems were experienced more frequently among native Dutch juvenile offenders than among juvenile offenders of different ethnic origin. It is, however, also possible that self-report surveys are less qualified for juvenile offenders of different ethnic origin in the detection of psychosocial problems and that different methods are required from those used in the present study.
- No differences were found across subgroups in the way juvenile offenders perceived their safety, autonomy, and wellbeing in the juvenile offenders’ institutions.
- Fewer boys than girls reported psychosocial problems.
- More boys than girls used physical and verbal violence during the period of imprisonment.

Research question 2: What are the relationships between the import and deprivation characteristics on the one hand and the adjustment to imprisonment on the other hand?

We subsequently examined which factors were related to the adjustment of imprisonment. The combined import and deprivation perspective states that how people adjust to imprisonment depends on both individual characteristics of the offender, and the characteristics of the correctional institution. In the present study, we examined the relationships between these import and deprivation characteristics and five aspects of adjustment to imprisonment separately. However, on the basis of the results it is also possible to indicate general tendencies in the results. In this context, we have been able to determine which characteristics appear to relate in general to dealing with the deprivation of liberty. Table S1 provides an overview of the results found. The table shows that in particular the social deprivation characteristics, such as the perceived treatment by staff and interaction with fellow group members, were important factors in relation to the psychological aspects of adjustment to imprisonment. In addition, practical or situational deprivation characteristics appeared to be relevant to perceived wellbeing (in contrast to stress). We furthermore observed that the perceived quality of the daily activity programme and a more situational characteristic as the size of the group related to registered aggressive misbehaviours of the juvenile offenders. The individual characteristics of the juvenile offenders themselves, such as psychosocial functioning at the entrance in the institution, or gender appeared to be related in particular to psychosocial functioning during imprisonment and registered misbehaviours.

Social deprivation characteristics

When putting the results of our study side by side, it is notable that the social aspects of adjustment to imprisonment, such as interaction with the supervisory team (treatment, support, and supervision) and interaction with group members (support) were related to the psychological aspects of adjustment to imprisonment and were less relevant to the behaviour of juvenile offenders during imprisonment. The more positive the juvenile offenders perceived social interaction with the staff and fellow group members, the safer they felt; the more autonomy they report to experience, the lower levels of stress they
reported. The interview data supported these results and mainly augmented it. This provides several interesting ingredients, which are not only of importance to how juvenile offenders deal with their imprisonment, but it is also knowledge that may aid to increasing the motivation of detained young people to participate in activities in the institutions. A previous study among Dutch juvenile offenders showed that the interactions with other people in a custodial institution may give the feeling of having control – at least to some extent – over the situation and that it may consequently contribute to increasing the motivation to participate in activities, but also to the motivation to participate in a treatment. The findings correspond with the existing literature.

- The perceived interaction with the staff and the fellow group members was positively related to the perceived safety, autonomy, wellbeing, and psychosocial functioning in detention.
- Interactions that were perceived as positive are important to the way in which juvenile offenders adjust to imprisonment. This provides possibilities for, for instance, increasing the motivation of young people to participate in a treatment and activities.
Table S1  Characteristics of the correctional institution and of young people related to five aspects of the deprivation of liberty (on the basis of surveys and semi-structured interviews)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of the correctional institution</th>
<th>Safety</th>
<th>Autonomy</th>
<th>Wellbeing/stress</th>
<th>Psychosocial problems (during detention)</th>
<th>Misbehaviours</th>
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<td>Social characteristics: interaction with supervisory team/staff (ST)</td>
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<td>Treatment by staff*</td>
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<td>Relationship with / support from staff*</td>
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<td>Supervision by staff**</td>
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<td>Social characteristics: interaction with fellow group members</td>
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<td>Relationship with fellow group members*</td>
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<td>Practical / situational characteristics</td>
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<td>Daily activity programme*</td>
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<td>Size of the residential group*</td>
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<td>Stage in detention**</td>
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<td>Characteristics of the juvenile offender at the beginning of imprisonment</td>
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<td>Gender = boy*</td>
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<td>Psychosocial problems (screening)*</td>
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<td>Number of previous detentions</td>
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</table>

* Apparent from quantitative analyses (N=207 except for misbehaviours N=133).  
** Additions from semi-structured interviews (N=38).

Practical en situational characteristics

In addition to social deprivation characteristics, we also found that practical deprivation characteristics, such as the experienced quality of the daily activity programme, and situational characteristics, such as the size of the group, was related to the way in which juvenile offenders experience their adjustment to imprisonment and in particular to wellbeing/stress and misbehaviour during imprisonment. From the semi-structured interview data it became clear that juvenile offenders also indicated that situational characteristics of imprisonment were relevant to the way juvenile offenders deal with imprisonment. Firstly, multiple juvenile offenders stated that there were places in the residential group that were perceived as unsafe: these were places in which incidents occurred outside the supervision of the staff. Secondly, the stage of imprisonment appeared to be of importance to the stress experienced and also to the autonomy experienced. We have not been able to confirm these results in the quantitative analysis, since these aspects were not taken into account in the surveys that were administered.
The results provide some interesting ingredients that may be relevant to increasing the safety in the residential groups, namely the importance of meaningful daytime activities and the possible influence of the number of juveniles in the residential group (which was a maximum of 10 young people at the time of administration).

- There is a positive relationship between the experienced quality of the daily activity programme and wellbeing/stress and a negative relationship with misbehaviour in imprisonment.
- There are places in the juvenile offenders’ institutions where it is possible for juvenile offenders to evade supervision of staff.
- The larger the group, the greater the likelihood of misbehaviour.
- Depending on the stage of imprisonment the juvenile offenders are in, there are differences in the experienced levels of autonomy and wellbeing/stress.

**Characteristics of juvenile offenders at the beginning of imprisonment (import characteristics)**

We found that several import characteristics were related to the specific aspects of adjustment to imprisonment. Firstly, we found a positive relationship between the number of previous detentions and the experienced levels of safety, which might be subscribed to the previous experiences of those juvenile offenders who had been detained before. Secondly, the strongest predictor of psychosocial problems appeared to be previous psychosocial problems. This is in conformity with findings from other studies. The fact that the stability of psychosocial functioning was confirmed by this study seems to be a relatively obvious finding, but we should not underestimate its importance. This finding again underlines to the importance of screening juvenile offenders properly upon arrival, so that this knowledge can be used to adjust the regime to the personal circumstances of the offenders. Thirdly, a distinct relationship was found between gender and the number of incidents of aggressive misbehaviours registered. During imprisonment, the incidents of aggressive misbehaviour registered more often concerned boys than girls.

- The more previous offenses a juvenile offender was convicted for, the more positively they reported on the perceived safety in a juvenile offenders’ institution. This may point to the fact that recidivists get used to the custodial situation quicker due to previous experiences, or that they have less trouble adjusting to it.
- The level of psychosocial problems seems to be stable over time.
Research question 3: What is the relationship between the attitude towards committing offences, adjustment to imprisonment, and the characteristics of the correctional institution?

The attitude of juvenile offenders towards delinquent behaviour was examined from the perspective of the moral development of juvenile offenders. Multiple studies have shown that the moral development of juvenile offenders is poor. In our study, we found that there was hardly any connection between the attitude of juvenile offenders towards committing offences and the five aspects of adjustment to imprisonment. The moral emotions in relation to the offence (feelings of guilt and shame) seem to be hardly associated with adjustment to imprisonment. It is worth mentioning that nearly all juvenile offenders in the current study had conventional attitudes towards delinquent behaviour. This does not correspond with the literature. A possible explanation may be that the surveys were sustainable to social desirability. On the other hand, the results could also indicate that the rather conventional attitude towards delinquent behaviour could be subscribed to a learning effect of following the mandatory training during imprisonment, which is specifically aimed at tackling cognitive errors. It is interesting, however, that the interview data regarding the moral emotions of juvenile offenders provided a different picture. Whereas from the survey data it could be concluded that juvenile offenders show feelings of regret towards the offence, the interview data show that these feelings of regret and feelings of guilt were not so much aimed at the victims, but more at the way in which they had dealt with things and also at the consequences of their acts for themselves (‘being caught’) or for their family members.

- Nearly all juvenile offenders reported rather conventional attitudes towards delinquent acts.
- Juvenile offenders also reported feelings of regret, shame, and guilt about the offence for which they were being detained, but these feelings focused on the consequences for themselves and their family and not so much at any victims.

Conclusion

There were some limitations to the study that should be mentioned, such as a disappointing response rate, and missing data in the registrations of the screening instruments from the files. We have taken these limitations into account. We think, however, that the restrictions have hardly affected the results of our study. With regard to the background characteristics, the final sample does not deviate from the population of juvenile offenders in the juvenile offenders’ institutions. In addition, it was found that most findings
also corresponded with the literature and in those instances where they did not correspond, they could be explained. We think we can state that the results apply generally to juvenile offenders who stay in juvenile offenders’ institutions for a maximum period of four months on the basis of pre-trial detention or juvenile detention.

This study focused on the way juvenile offenders deal with their imprisonment. Much previous research among juvenile delinquents starts from the concept of ‘What Works’ and is primarily aimed at the question to what extent specific interventions (behavioural or cognitive interventions) affect recidivism of juvenile offenders, behaviour that will be exhibited outside the institution in the future and which may be influenced by so many other factors than the intervention in the institution alone (for example available aftercare, characteristics of the social environment, etcetera). Such research does not provide any information on the daily situation in which young detainees live, how they cope with it, and which factors play a role in this context. It consequently provides insufficient starting points for the day-to-day management on how to cope with the problematic group of juvenile offenders. An understanding of how juvenile offenders adjust to imprisonment is not only relevant for the day-to-day management and, for instance, for the safety in the juvenile offenders’ institutions, but according to some, the adjustment of juvenile offenders to an imprisonment may also be predictive for future recidivism. Future research should focus on the latter.

As far as we are concerned, this study is the first large-scale empirical multi method study in the Netherlands that focuses on the adjustment to imprisonment of juvenile offenders and the factors that are expected to be associated with the adjustment. On the basis of the results of the present study we conclude that social, practical, and situational as well as import characteristics are associated with the way in which juvenile offenders adjust to imprisonment. Social characteristics of adjustment to imprisonment, such as the perceived interaction with staff, the perception of fairness in treatment by staff, positive relationship with staff, and supervision by staff appear to be relevant in particular to the psychological perception of the adjustment to imprisonment. These social factors may provide clear starting points for increasing the motivation of young people to participate in activities in the institution, including treatment. The residential groups and the continuous presence of staff in the group, as is customary in Dutch juvenile correctional institutions, may consequently also provide possibilities to ensure that young people in correctional institutions gain positive experiences, certainly so because this study also shows that the residential groups in which juvenile offenders are detained is important for their wellbeing, stress, and feeling of safety. Practical and situational characteristics of the institution, such as the daily activity programme, the size of the residential group, and the stage of the stay in the institution were also related to the perceived stress or misbe-
haviours (registered or not) in an institution. This knowledge could contribute to a better understanding of which aspects of juvenile imprisonment could possibly contribute to the overall functioning of juvenile offenders. This study has demonstrated that, despite the fact that the adjustment to imprisonment should be the ‘ultimum remedium’ for juvenile offenders, there are still various, in particular social factors, in such a stressful environment that may contribute positively to the way in which young people deal with their imprisonment.