Summary

Halt: The alternative?
The effects of the Halt arrangement revisited

For 25 years now, an alternative punishment has been imposed in The Netherlands on juveniles between the ages of 12 and 18 who have committed a minor offence: The Halt arrangement. Juveniles who have been picked up by the police for having committed a criminal offence are given the opportunity to avoid a criminal record by referring them to a Halt Bureau. The Halt arrangement makes juveniles aware of their behaviour and offers them the opportunity to make good the harm they may have inflicted. This is achieved by talks, community service or learning assignments and – if relevant – by apologising to the victim and repairing any damage done. The underlying thought is that by confronting juveniles with the consequences of their behaviour and by offering alternatives for their behaviour they can be prevented from re-offending. The Halt arrangement was originally meant for first offenders of vandalism. Over the years the scope has been widened markedly and it is now applied to a more varied range of criminal offences. Moreover, its target group has been extended to second offenders in the sense that – under certain conditions – juveniles may be offered Halt intervention twice. Halt and the effects of the Halt arrangement have been the subject of various research studies ever since the eighties. However, these studies do not provide an unambiguous and complete picture of the effects of Halt on recidivism and other behaviour of these juveniles. 25 years after the first Halt Bureau was established, Beke Consultancy has performed a national study into Halt’s effectiveness. This study was commissioned by the Commissioning Research Division (EWB) of the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC). The study monitored almost one thousand juveniles at different points in time for a period of one year, juveniles who were apprehended for having committed a criminal offence and were subsequently referred to Halt by the police. Halt invited these juveniles (along with their parents) to their office, who were then requested to participate in the research study. If they agreed to participate they were assigned to either one of two groups. Half of these juveniles participated in the Halt programme (discussing their behaviour, performing community service and/or learning assignments, and apologising for and/or paying for any damage inflicted), the other half of these juveniles were exempted from such activities because of the study. Hence, the study used an experimental group (juveniles who participated in the Halt programme) and a control group (juveniles who did not participate in the Halt programme).

The study examined the effects of the Halt arrangement on recidivism, alternative behaviours and the attitudes of these juveniles. This was done by comparing the experimental group with the control group. The first measurement (the pre-test) took place when the juveniles and
their parent(s)/guardian(s) were invited to the Halt Bureau. In both
the experimental and the control group the juveniles and their parents
completed a questionnaire at the office visit. The Halt staff member
also completed a questionnaire at this point in time. The juveniles in
the control group were then sent home whereas the juveniles in the
experimental group followed the rest of the Halt programme. Half a year
later the juveniles and their parents (from both experimental and control
group) completed a second questionnaire (the post-test). Finally, six
months after the post-test, the police-registered crime data on all juvenile
offenders over the one-year-period after the initial contact with Halt were
collected and analysed.

The results of the study indicate that juveniles who participated in the
Halt programme showed the same pattern of recidivism after one year
as juveniles who did not participate in the programme: the seriousness
and frequency of criminal offences were similar in both groups. However,
there is one remarkable difference which is difficult to explain: the
juveniles who participated in the Halt programme more often committed
acts of vandalism afterwards. It also turned out that after six months both
groups showed fewer problems as to emotions, behaviour, relationships,
and attention. Thus, participation in the Halt programme does not appear
to reduce criminality and behavioural problems in juveniles. 
Considering the fact that no differences between the two groups were
found, the response of the police to the criminal act – the fact that the
juvenile is picked up – and the resulting threat of punishment – being
referred to Halt – might be more important than the actual punishment
itself. Indeed, juveniles indicated that being picked up by the police was
the worst part of the experience.

On the other hand, approximately two thirds of the juveniles indicated
that they had learned a lot from the Halt arrangement – especially from
the punishment and the talks. This learning effect was greater in juveniles
who had to complete some kind of learning assignment or a punishment
that was a combination of community service and learning than in
juveniles who only had to do community service. 
A closer look at the juveniles who participated in the Halt programme
reveals that there are indeed certain factors that play a role in recidivism.
As to the chance of re-offending, it appears that the Halt programme is
a more appropriate intervention for group offenders who are susceptible
to group pressure than for offenders who act on their own. Juveniles who
committed a criminal offence following the example of others, less often
and/or less seriously re-offended.

Besides providing insight into the effects of the Halt arrangement, the
study also provides insight into the factors that proved to be effective.
When we look at the various elements of the Halt programme it appears
that there is a relationship between the juvenile apologising for his
acts and the juvenile’s criminal behaviour in the future. Juveniles who
apologised to the victim tended to commit fewer and/or minor offences. The remaining elements of the Halt programme such as type and duration of punishment, the number of talks, a direct link between punishment and crime, and a claim settlement, did not affect recidivism. Neither have previous studies been able to establish a relationship (apart from the degree of personal contact between juveniles and Halt staff members) between the features of the Halt programme and recidivism. An important finding of this research study is that Halt staff members are quite capable of assessing whether or not juveniles will re-offend. Juveniles who, according to Halt staff members, were more likely to revert to criminal behaviour after the Halt intervention, appeared to re-offend more often and to have more problems as well.

Although in general we have not found the Halt arrangement to affect recidivism, further analysis indicated that a particular subset of participants did indeed perform slightly better after the Halt intervention. The study reveals a profile of juveniles who benefitted the most from the Halt arrangement in the sense that there is a relationship between the Halt intervention and decreasing levels of recidivism. Basically, they are first offenders who are aware of the consequences of their criminal behaviour, have no or only mild problems (such as problems at school, in the family or with friends), show socially acceptable behaviour and spend their free time in a positive way. One final characteristic is the fact that juveniles who do not live in the Randstad area benefited more from the Halt arrangement. It should be pointed out that this positive effect only occurred in juveniles who matched the profile more closely.

The findings of this study indicate that the Halt arrangement is not equally effective for all juveniles when it comes to influencing behaviour in a positive way. Screening of juveniles by professionals (immediately after they have been picked up by the police) in order to assess whether they really qualify for a Halt referral (customisation) seems to be essential in order for Halt to accomplish its goals. Juveniles who display negative behaviour that is an indication of more complex problems or juveniles who are thought to run a higher risk of recidivism, should be supported more intensively than is customary with the present Halt approach. For juveniles to whom this does not apply, a session between the juvenile and their parent(s) and a professional along with apologising to the victim might be sufficient.

All in all, the results of this study provide enough clues to revise the Halt procedure in 2006 in order to achieve the desired results in distinct juvenile target or risk groups.