Abstract

Literature on the development of antisocial behaviour states that serious and persistent delinquent behaviour often starts at a very young age. Additionally, interventions imposed at an early age may be more effective than when a delinquent career has become more stable. Children who display delinquent behaviour before the age of twelve have a high risk of developing a persistent pattern of severe delinquent behaviour, which may cost society a lot, both materially and immaterially. It is however unclear which early antisocial children will eventually become persistent and serious delinquents. Children with early police contact may well be a high-risk group. In The Netherlands, little is known on the characteristics of children below 12 with a first police contact. A more effective recognition of relevant socio-demographic, psychiatric, psychological, and crime-related risk factors in this group of child delinquents may enable better decision-making at an early stage, better referral to appropriate services and more effective intervention.

In order to obtain a better insight in the characteristics of children with police contacts, a study was designed that aimed at investigating the socio-demographic, psychological, psychiatric, environmental, and crime related characteristics of children below 12 with a first police contact because of criminal behaviour. By means of a two-year follow-up, the predictive value of the variables of interest in predicting recidivism will be evaluated. In three different police-districts (‘politieregio’s’), 300 children under the age of 12 will be investigated three times: right after their first registration by the police (T0), one year after the first registration (T1), and two years after the first registration (T3). In order to pretest the practical detail of the full study, a pilot study, financed by the Justice Department (WODC) was carried out on 40 children with a first police contact. The goal of the pilot study was to establish the logistic feasibility and to investigate whether is was possible to include enough children who could be representative for the compete group of registered first-offenders below 12. Also, the aim was to select and pretest the instruments needed for this purpose.

During the pilot study, an overall inclusion procedure was developed in intensive collaboration with the police-districts (partly) of Gelderland-Midden and Utrecht. These two regions were very enthusiastic and were willing to participate in this research project. And although substantial efforts were required from all participating partners, the inclusion procedure was considered feasible in practice. Forty-five children and their parents participated in the pilot study, and a response percentage of 34% was reached. The percentage was higher (50%) when children who could not be contacted by phone were excluded. The responders did not differ from the non-responders on age, sex, neighbourhood characteristics, or crime category.

A literature study was carried out in order to define the riskfactors to be investigated and to select the set of instruments to be used for this purpose. After pretesting the instruments on the 45 participants, their parents and teachers during the pilot study, it was considered possible to measure the variables of interest.

Administration of the instruments was considered feasible for the majority of them and the whole set could be completed within the available time per appointment. The scores showed a satisfying range on most instruments. Some very preliminary results
were presented in the report, but they should be interpreted with caution. In comparison to the normal population, the pilot group reported more difficulties in intellectual and school functioning. Also, more psychopathology (mostly ADHD and ODD) was reported than can be expected in the normal population. Results indicated a higher prevalence of disorders and police contacts in the family. Conducting the tests with immigrants revealed two sorts of difficulties. First, some questionnaires and interviews were hard to fill out due to language problems. Second, a tendency to underreport problem behaviour may exist because of cultural differences in the immigrant population (and in case of the children, underachievement on the intellectual measures may have occurred).

The results of the pilot lead to the conclusion that the planned study can be conducted, although the response rate is quite low and much effort will be needed to include the total number of children. From the pilot study, some implications for the main study can be listed. First, in order to include 300 of children, more police regions should be contacted. This will be done by including the complete district Gelderland-Midden (in the pilot only the sub district Arnhem-Veluwezoom was included) and by adding the police district Rotterdam-Rijnmond. When a particular group of children turns out to be underrepresented in main study sample of 300, particular groups of children may be focused on at the end of the inclusion period. Researchers will make inquiries with experts about the best way to conduct research in immigrants. Based on the findings in the pilot study, a number of adjustments have been made to the used set of instruments.