

Process evaluation of pilot young adult prevention programme

SUMMARY

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Since 2014 young adults up to the age of 23 at the time of the offence can be sentenced as a juvenile (Act of Adolescent Criminal law) in the Netherlands. The premise of this law is that young adults will generally be sentenced under the regular 'adult' criminal law provisions. Deviation from this will only take place exceptionally, because of the personality of the offender or the circumstances under which the offense was committed. In practice both public prosecutors and judges play an important role in the decision to apply the law. The public prosecution service has developed a list of indicators that can be used as a basis for the decision to request the application of juvenile criminal law for young adults. Criteria are: still living at home, going to school, needs support because of mild intellectual disabilities and is open to educational support (Schmidt, Rap, Liefwaard, 2020).

Juveniles between the ages of 12-17 who commit minor offences may be referred to the HALT juvenile crime prevention programme. The HALT programme is an extra-judicial settlement that allows juveniles to learn from their mistakes, apologise to the victims, partake in community service, and pay for or repair damage resulting from the offence. However, an extra-judicial settlement is not available for young adults, therefore a HALT 18+ pilot programme was initiated.

This study concerns a process evaluation of the HALT 18+ pilot programme as well as a review of the literature regarding the effectiveness of (elements of) HALT-like crime prevention programmes for young adults. As part of the process evaluation of Halt 18+ registration data from HALT and the police was analysed and interviews were held with 23 professionals from various organizations (including HALT, the Public Prosecutor's Office, Police, Victim Support

and Probation Service), 15 young adults who participated in HALT 18+ as well as eight parents, guardians and persons trusted by these young adults.

The research questions are:

- How is the HALT 18+ pilot programme implemented?
- Is there any empirical support for the effectiveness of (elements of) HALT-like crime prevention programmes for young adults?
- Are there opportunities for the further development of the HALT 18+ pilot programme?
- The HALT 18+ pilot programme.

The HALT 18+ pilot programme emerges from a need to offer a more tailor-made approach when it comes to young adult first offenders who committed a minor offence. The objective of the programme is to contribute to young adults' understanding of the consequences of delinquent behaviour, help them take responsibility for the consequences of the offence, and develop alternative behaviours to prevent recidivism.

The HALT 18+ pilot programme is aimed at young adults between the ages of 18-23. The criteria for participation are similar to the HALT programme for juveniles: i.e., it must concern a minor offence, and damages must be limited (as laid down in the Designation of Halt Offences Decree; Besluit aanwijzing Halt-feiten). Also the list of indicators from the prosecution office can be used. In addition, the young adult must confess to the offence, and must be motivated to carry out the different components of the HALT programme. Although the maximum HALT sentence for juveniles is 20 hours, this can be extended to 30 hours in the case of young adults.

The HALT 18+ pilot programme is not an extra-judicial settlement, as is the case with the regular HALT programme for juveniles. Instead, when a young adult is referred to the HALT 18+ pilot programme, the public prosecutor does not prosecute the case any further on the condition that the programme is successfully completed.

The current study aims to gain insight into the implementation of the HALT 18+ pilot programme, and identify opportunities for its further development. The study encompasses a literature review about the effectiveness of (elements of) HALT-like crime prevention programmes for young adults, as well as a process evaluation. The evaluation focusses on the design, implementation, and execution of the HALT 18+ pilot programme.

Implementation

As a result of the measures taken by the Dutch government since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, professionals primarily worked from home during the implementation of the HALT 18+ pilot programme. There was little deliberation between the three core partners: police, Public Prosecutor and Halt. Nonetheless, differences of opinion were uncommon. Only in a few cases did a HALT staff member contact the Public Prosecutor about their decision of the referral of the young adult to the HALT 18+ pilot programme.

Target group

Between November 2019 and March 2021, 64 young adults who met the HALT criteria were referred to the HALT 18+ pilot programme. This number is lower than expected. Possible reasons for the low referral rate include a lack of awareness of the existence of the pilot among police and prosecutors, as well as the COVID-19 measures that also caused a significant decrease in the number of juveniles referred to the regular HALT programme.

Almost all of the 64 young adults were between the ages of 18-19; two-thirds were male and one-third female. Educational levels varied; about half of the participants had an intermediate vocational education (MBO) level, and a minority was enrolled in higher education. There was hardly any indication of a mild intellectual disability, but due to the COVID-19 measures, assessments of intellectual disability were no longer carried out. Based on the available information, most young adults lived with (one of) their parents and some in an assisted living facility. Some of the young adults were in a vulnerable situation because of problems at home, potential mental disability, substance abuse, or (other) personal problems.

Theft was one of the most common offences, but young adults were also referred to the pilot programme for other offences, such as handling stolen goods, vandalism, open violence against property, fraud, and embezzlement. Another common offence was insulting an official.

The criminal justice partners interviewed in this study, assert that the HALT 18+ programme should not be restricted to a specific subgroup of young adults, like those with a (mild) intellectual disability or living with their parents. Their main argument is that young adulthood tends to be characterised by reckless behaviour, which can result in committing crimes, and therefore a HALT programme can be of pedagogical value in this phase of life. All young adult first offenders who meet the HALT criteria (certain minor offences, a certain amount of damage, a confessing and motivated suspect) are therefore included in the target group and should be referred to the HALT 18+ pilot programme, criminal justice partners argue. This argumentation of the criminal justice partners means that, in principle, the juvenile justice system should be applied to young adults, unless there are reasons to deviate from it (as opposed to the current system whereby the juvenile justice system can be applied to young adults if there is a specific reason to do so, e.g. because of the personality of the offender or the circumstances under which the offense was committed).

Similar conclusions were reached by Van der Laan and colleagues (2021). Adult criminal law is the starting point for young adults – unless there are specific reasons to apply the juvenile criminal law. Because of this starting point, however, many young adults for whom juvenile criminal law should apply, are overlooked. Based on current knowledge about the neuropsychological development of young adults, it is justifiable to take the juvenile justice system as a starting point for young adults, unless there are grounds to deviate from it, according to Van der Laan and colleagues (2021).

Execution of the pilot

Young adults are a new target group for HALT staff. Staff members of HALT work with young adults according to the six pillars upon which the original HALT intervention is based.

Pillar 1 involves an assessment of underlying problems based on a set of predetermined indicators. Screening for mild intellectual disability is not possible via video conferencing, and therefore has not been carried out since the COVID-19 measures came into effect. Not all interviewed young adults felt they had been asked about their specific needs. A bottleneck is that the HALT staff is currently less familiar with the social services available for young adults than with the social services for juveniles.

Pillar 2 involves learning assignments, which aim to increase young adults' awareness by reflecting on their behaviour. The learning assignments are offered at various levels. However, the interviewed young adults experienced some assignments as childish or not fitting to the stage of their life.

Pillar 3 concerns the involvement of parents. In the case of young adults, parental involvement is not mandatory (it is, in the case of juveniles). Parental involvement can, however, benefit the completion of the various HALT

assignments. The possibility to include other support figures, such as partner or friends, is until now often overlooked by HALT staff.

Pillar 4 involves restoration towards victims. The HALT programme pays attention to restoration in various ways. In 69% of the cases of young adults a concrete assignment related to apologizing to the victim(s) was made. This percentage is similar for juveniles.

Pillar 5 relates to the development of social skills through learning and work assignments. The regular HALT work placements are not always suitable for young adults and can be better oriented towards the future and career of young adults. Yet, due to the COVID-19 measures, it was challenging to find work placements.

Although the literature review did not yield any concrete elements of crime prevention programmes for young adults that are in line with these pillars and have proven to be effective, it does indicate that restorative justice effectively prevents recidivism. In addition, literature shows that it is important to take the increasing independence of young adults, as well as their social context, into account when designing a crime prevention programme. Existing interventions aimed at education and work, show positive results. Especially in the context of minor offences. In addition, parents and other prosocial relationships can be important in preventing recidivism. More specifically, it appears that interventions that include a mentoring component (in which a mentor functions as a role model, offers emotional support, and gives advice) can have a positive effect in reducing recidivism.

Recommendations for further development

The most significant opportunities for the further development of the HALT 18+ include, firstly, legislative changes that are necessary in order to allow for an extra-judicial settlement for young adults. Second, with regards to the working process, more attention should be paid to include a referral to HALT as an option for young adults.

Third, the question is whether there should be more alignment with the list of indicators as a framework. Research shows that criminal justice partners consider the HALT programme suitable for all young adults who meet the HALT criteria, unless a pedagogical measure is deemed inappropriate. In this case, the list of indicators is of limited use.

Fourth and finally, the HALT 18+ pilot programme should be further developed. The learning and work assignments, and the communication and behaviour of HALT staff members towards the young adults, should be focused on increasing the young adults' competencies and on helping them take responsibility. The added pedagogical value of HALT for this particular target group lies in supporting their development towards independence; the learning assignments must be more aligned with this objective. The role of a mentor (in addition to the role of parents or guardians, which is subject to change in the transition from adolescence to young adulthood) also deserves attention as an effective intervention element.

Conclusion

The HALT 18+ pilot programme was carried out when the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on everyday life. Working from home has restricted (casual) exchange on the work floor, which has negatively impacted awareness of the pilot within the police and public prosecution office. Criminal justice partners involved in the pilot programme are in favour of a HALT programme

for young adults. This allows for a more tailor-made approach to the settlement of minor offenses committed by young adults. This is in line with current developments, in which more attention is paid to tailor-made approaches, settlements aimed at preventing recidivism, and restorative justice. Criminal justice partners argue in favour of ensuring the HALT 18+ programme is an option for all young adult first offenders who meet the HALT criteria. In principle, this means that unless there are reasons to deviate from it, these young adults should be tried within the confines of juvenile criminal law.

Young adults and their parents/guardians seem appreciative of the HALT 18+ programme. They consider it a second chance, and assume that they will not encounter any problems with obtaining a Certificate of Good Behaviour. Respondents were particularly appreciative of the restoration assignments. As well as the work and learning assignments – on the condition that these contribute to their development and independence. This expressed need for independence is in line with what is known about young adulthood as a distinct phase of life, where certain domains related to independence become more important as adolescents age. This need for greater independence and the ability to take more responsibility, emerge from the pilot as something that is specific to young adults, which is different in the case of juveniles.

Crime prevention programmes can capitalize on this, for example, by tackling problems in the domains of work, education or interpersonal relationships. Individual risk factors, such as self-control and aggression, can also be a target for specific programme elements. Where more intensive guidance than HALT can provide is necessary, an effective referral structure is crucial.

In the long term, legislative changes are necessary to allow the HALT programme for young adult (first) offenders to become a pedagogical measure outside of the criminal justice system. In the short term, the further development of the HALT programme for young adults as a pilot, remains challenging. Yet, the current report points to a number of possible areas of improvement.

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