

# The relevance of prevention to probation

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The Dutch government considers crime to be a ‘hot item’. And the name of the Dutch Safety program, ‘*Safety begins with Prevention*’ shows us they take it seriously. It sounds plausible. The demand for better crime prevention fits perfectly in the European political climate, described by some as Safety Utopia (Boutellier, 2002). Citizens demand maximum individual freedom but they are decreasingly tolerant of the risks associated with it. Governments are expected to provide both, individual freedom and risk control. Those aims, however, are incompatible. In the Netherlands, the political culture is increasingly focusing on the aim of risk prevention.

Along with these sociological developments, other reasons for the growing interest in prevention are the growing costs connected to antisocial behaviour and criminality. In the Netherlands these are estimated at 20 billion Euro.

In spite of that, the term ‘prevention’ has hardly been used by the Dutch probation office itself. But the most recent policy document of the Dutch probation service, dated 2008, contains a section on prevention for the first time in years. Prevention is now considered a necessity and the main aim should

be to influence history preceding the first crime. A telling detail is that this document refers to literature dating from 1976. Has, apparently, nothing significant has been written regarding that matter since then?

Before going any further, it will be helpful to clarify the term ‘prevention’. Furthermore it is important to decide whether the idea of prevention as being soft is accurate. Research on the effect of probation interventions is nowadays more common than 40 years ago. Everybody understands the terms ‘what works’. But can we also prove that prevention works? And, if so, is prevention relevant for probation? In this article we will offer some comments on those issues.

## **THE PREVENTION CONTINUUM**

For years crime prevention has been regarded as identical to prevention in the field of ill health and disease. Therefore, crime prevention is mostly described in the three variants used in the traditional ‘disease prevention model; namely primary, secondary and tertiary prevention.

In international mental health care, another model is gradually becoming more common. In the Netherlands, child protection and youth care use this new model to describe the different types of prevention for child abuse (Hermanns, 2008). This model might be useful for probation as well. It describes a prevention continuum in which different target groups are defined:

1. Universal prevention, aiming at the population as a whole.
2. Selective preventive interventions, aiming at demographic or geographically targeted groups, statistically known to have a higher prevalence of criminality.
3. Indicated high risk preventive interventions: early interventions aimed at individuals who have specific risk factors, or who have taken some steps in the direction of criminal development.
4. Clinical intervention: diagnostics and interventions in cases of actual criminal behaviour.

## 1. UNIVERSAL PREVENTION

Universal prevention is aimed at the population as a whole, and includes social investment in general, such as investment in the quality of education and media campaigns which target upbringing or criminality.

Should one consider such general social investment as falling within the domain of Probation? According to Boutellier (2002), Hermanns (2008) and other researchers, we should not. Influenced by the idea of ‘Safety Utopia’, crime prevention is increasingly becoming the main argument for all sorts of social interventions. However, such general social interventions have value in themselves, and serve many more purposes than safety alone: participation, social bonding, work and income are basic features of our civil society. To make a comparison with playing soccer: general investments must play their role in the political frontline of society, whereas crime prevention should present the midfield and juridical interventions the defence (Boutellier, 2005). Nowadays, it sometimes seems to be the other way around.

Nevertheless, can we prove the effectiveness of these social investments with regard to preventing crime? The more general a certain intervention is, the harder it is to prove scientifically its effects on specific aims. But it is well known that the average delinquent is less highly educated and more often unemployed in comparison with the whole population. Therefore, we may assume that programs which stimulate social participation are likely to help reduce crime.

In the words of Professor Zigler, the American pioneer of pedagogical prevention and family support: *“The problems of many families will only be solved by changes in the basic features of the infrastructure of society. No amount of counselling, early childhood curricula, or home visits will take the place of jobs that provide decent incomes, affordable housing, appropriate health care, optimal family configurations or integral neighbourhoods where children encounter positive role models”* (Zigler, 1992).

Of course these general measures and investments are primarily the responsibility of central and local governments and of society as a whole. A specific task for probation research would be to articulate and emphasise the influence of general factors on the development of criminal careers.

## 2. SELECTIVE PREVENTIVE INTERVENTIONS

This kind of prevention is aimed at demographic and geographically defined target groups, statistically known to have a higher prevalence of criminality. This ‘Risk Group Approach’ involves education of individuals or subgroups that are more likely to become criminal or antisocial. Certain problematic areas can be chosen, or a defined group of people selected, such as young single mothers. Selective prevention is quite popular in the Netherlands and is usually aimed at poorer areas and immigrant communities. The effectiveness of these programs has hardly been proven and their great disadvantage is that they can be stigmatising or segregating. People who are being considered a ‘risk to society’ could easily lose self confidence and therefore these programs can prove counterproductive. An additional problem is the fact that, individual

prediction being a difficult matter, a whole group is likely to be approached when only a few of its members will ever actually start causing problems. This makes the costs relatively high compared with the possible effects. Programs in this category seem to be more popular than perhaps they should. They mainly contribute to good feelings among the public instead of offering clear and specific results. The DARE project, for example, that educates children involved in drug abuse and teaches them refusal skills, was very popular for a long time in many countries. It seemed to be very effective in the short term, but recent research over ten years has not shown any significant positive effects.

There are, however, some examples of effective programs of this kind. According to a number of researchers (e.g. Junger et al.) prevention and antisocial behaviour should be specifically aimed at children in the preschool period. Interventions reducing beginning antisocial behaviour are far more effective than interventions with adults. Interventions should, however, only take place if the risks are extremely high, because of the stigmatising and labelling effects. One of the very few examples of proven effective programs is the Nurse Family partnership. This program has been initiated to help specified pregnant underclass women to raise their first child. They are intensively supported from the start of their pregnancy until the child reaches the age of 24 months. This program has been shown to be very effective. Research amongst four year old children found that child abuse was 75% lower than in the control group. Furthermore, those children, at a later age, were significantly less involved in crime and drugs abuse. An intervention that reduces child abuse is apparently also suitable to reduce anti social behaviour and the start of a criminal career. This program was also been shown to be cost effective.

Another well researched and successful program is the Perry Preschool Program. Here, three and four year old children from poorer families have been receiving an intensive pre school training and home visiting. The teaching is non-traditional and the program aims at developing reflexive competences. Furthermore the children are visited by a specialist professional on a weekly basis. The costs of the program are relatively low, yet its effects are shown

to be significant and sustainable. Long term studies are also showing that those who have participated in the program are performing better than the control group on a wide variety of areas at the age of 40. Their average income is higher, their family relations are more solid and, most important, the prevalence of crime amongst the participants is significantly lower (36% versus 55% in the control group). In different international overviews this program is considered to be an example of a proven effective program. The evaluations make clear that the effects are related to the specific combinations made in this program, including teaching reflexive competence, and to the methods which include home visits rather than simply relying on traditional instruction. Because of its success, the program has been introduced in different countries, but unfortunately not always in its complete form, ie without the home visiting to keep costs down. By consequence its effectiveness has been diminished.

In the Netherlands, police and probation officers visit schools in risk areas to inform youngsters of the disadvantages of choosing a criminal career, although the effects of these interventions have not been assessed. In general it is known from *what works* research that interventions based on deterrence are hardly effective or, worse, counter-productive: they could even make youngsters more interested in crime. For some deterrence programs this negative effect has been demonstrated in research.

Despite of a few effective programs, for the most part, selective preventive programs have little impact beyond the good feelings they generate for the public and policy makers. Moreover, their costs are often relatively high. The programs have been oriented towards rather general groups, selected on a statistical base. Therefore this second type of prevention, like the first one, should be considered as relevant to society as a whole. Proven effective programs, like those that indirectly, but clearly, influence criminality, tend to be aimed at very young children and fall within generally the domain of youth health care, rather than probation. Probation could, however, usefully inform policy makers about the risk factors and could perhaps sponsor more research on the impact of such preventive programs.

### 3. INDICATED HIGH RISK PREVENTIVE INTERVENTION

This type of prevention covers early interventions aimed at individuals at risk (instead of groups). Such prevention is based upon the assumption that children with certain characteristics and extremely difficult behaviour, in combination with poor parenting have a relatively high probability of developing violent criminal behaviour. According to some researchers (e.g. van der Laan,) one should begin to intervene with these children in the preschool period although other authors (e.g. Hermanns) warn us about the stigmatising and labelling effects of intervening too early. According to Weijers to isolate any such children and putting them under supervision of youth probation is unlikely to be effective. Correcting their behaviour is properly the responsibility of their parents, teachers and the police.

An example of this type of prevention is the Dutch project called: from 8 to 8: 160 young people from Amsterdam, with known behaviour problems in the public domain, but not yet being delinquent, are following a program that occupies them for twelve hours a day in a positive pro-social way. The effects are not yet known but research is on -going. Another important international example is the Scared-Straight project that confronts first-time offenders with the shocking reality of life in prison. The aim of this project is to deter those delinquents in order to prevent them from committing another crime. In 1979 the project claimed to have a success score of roughly 80%. Only recently however a thorough meta-analysis has been carried out: with the results indicating very poor effectiveness for projects of this nature. The analysis has found that recidivism amongst the participating delinquents is 1.6 to 1.7 times higher than for those who did not participate. Nevertheless the program is still being applied in America, Canada and several European countries, under different titles.

An American example of an effective program of this kind is the American Big Brother Big Sister project. This is an intensive individual mentoring program for youths aged between 6 and 18, who appear to develop problem behaviour in school. Selected volunteers are mentoring the children and

they also have contact with their parents for a long period. After 18 months the participating group was 46% less likely than the control group to initiate drug use during their study period. Another American example of an effective prevention program is 'functional family therapy'. It is an intensive multimodal program, aimed at families with children between 11 and 18 who demonstrate antisocial and maladjusted behaviour. They focus on strengthening the protective factors more than reducing risk factors. The program invests heavily in motivating the families to stay in the program and minimising the risk of treatment termination. The effect of this program illustrates one of the general findings of *what works*, namely the fact that deterrence doesn't usually work and working with positive aims and motivational strategies is the better alternative.

Probation can be involved in the development of prevention for youngsters at high risk. Careful consideration should however always be given to whether or not a certain intervention is effective, ethical and legal. High quality research with random controlled trials has not yet been carried out to any significant extent and it is worthwhile reflecting on the findings of the international research on prevention before starting. There are too many examples of ineffective 'feel good' programs that have ignored that advice.

### 4. CLINICAL INTERVENTION

These are many potential diagnostics and interventions that can be applied with convicted criminals. When other types of prevention have already failed the main target becomes that of preventing an individual from re-offending. This is, of course, the most important domain of preventive work for Probation, although it is not widely spoken about. However, the perspective of prevention possibly leads us to new methods and programs. The few effective programs show us some common features, such as: community based, multimodal, intensive, lead by positive treatment goals, with much attention devoted to motivational strategies and intensive collaboration between probation, youth health care, school, family, peers and other informal networks.



We could ask ourselves: to what extent are those features already common in routine probation work? Could it be possible to bring those apparently preventive characteristics more clearly into the current probation methods? How can we use, for instance, the results of the desistance approach that presumes the development of social capital to be a very relevant factor, such as finding and keeping a job, income, relations? According to one research group (Mc Neill, Whyte, et al.) the development of social capital should be a central task for probation. The use of informal networks, such as the circles of support used with sex offenders can be helpful too. Furthermore, investment in a strong and effective collaboration with police, prison, social welfare and other partners is always likely to be important.

A Dutch example is Prison Gate Office, a program that provides intensive aftercare to ex prisoners. This program is a cooperation between prison, local government, social welfare, housing corporations, probation and other relevant participants. Typically, however, the question arises of which organisation is going to finance such a promising program: particularly if it is not a recognised part of the probation services' tasks and therefore not subsidised by the government. So far, the prisons have paid for this program out of their own financial reserves. But a long term stable solution has still to be found.

## CONCLUSION

It is obvious both that crime is to be discouraged and that prevention of recidivism is not easy. By consequence, prevention is important. Currently many prevention activities have been developed, however, only very few programs have proved to be particularly effective. We desire a society without any risk and are increasingly willing to give up important values such as personal freedom, privacy and the principle of equality in return for less crime. A moral panic seems to have broken out. One of the disadvantages of our quest 'to be there as early as possible' is that more children at an earlier age are being regarded as a risk to society and are taken out of their normal environment. Generally, prevention involving young children can do more harm than good. However a few programs are promising or successful and those programs have some features in common. We can and have to learn from them.

Probation probably should not, or at least only rarely, be involved in the first three kinds of prevention. Instead, it should mainly invest in new ways and methods for enabling offenders to stop their criminal behaviour. Learning from the prevention perspective, probation can however focus less on short term effects and more on continuity and lasting, stable change for offenders.