Criminogenic risk factors and promotive factors in juveniles undergoing a screening by the Dutch Child Protection Board. An exploratory analysis of the degree of concern and the criminogenic Risk Factors and promotive factors identified by child welfare investigators.

For the purpose of providing judicial interventions, it is important to the Ministry of Justice to investigate the degree of psychosocial problems and criminogenic risk factors and promotive factors occur in juveniles who come into contact with the police and/or the criminal justice system as a result of committing an offence. In order to reduce recidivism, it is essential to implement judicial behaviour interventions that are proven effective or promising and which are targeted at reducing the underlying problems of juvenile offenders. Psychosocial problems of juvenile offenders are wide-ranging, and are not necessarily directly associated with committing an offence or with recidivism. The problems may also be associated with developmental or psychiatric disorders. To reduce the risk of recidivism, it is important that interventions are targeted at those (dynamic) factors that are directly associated with delinquent behaviour and recidivism, the so-called risk and promotive factors. Risk factors are factors that are associated with an increased risk of delinquency and/or recidivism, whereas promotive factors are related to a reduction of delinquency and/or recidivism.

The Child Protection Board (the Board) and the Judicial Youth Policy Department (DJJ) requested the Research and Documentation Centre of the Dutch Ministry of Justice (WODC) to conduct an exploratory and preliminary study of the degree in which child welfare investigators express concerns about possible psychosocial problems and the degree in which risk and promotive factors are observed in juveniles undergoing a Basic Screening for use by the Dutch Child Protection Board (a 'BARO') because the police suspected them of having committed an offence. At the request of the Board and the DJJ, the study was also directed at determining any indications of possible psychosocial problems and risk and promotive factors in juveniles who underwent a BARO after the school attendance officer had referred them to the Board for violating the Compulsory Education Act.

This study provides an overview of the problems encountered by juveniles at the beginning of the judicial chain. The insights gained into these problems are a major step for the range of interventions on which the Ministry of Justice will focus its attention during the next few years.

Aims of the study and research questions
The aims of the study are to provide an exploratory analysis of indications of possible psychosocial problems and risk and promotive factors in juveniles undergoing a screening by the Child Protection Board; either because the police suspected them of having committed an offence or
because they had violated the Compulsory Education Act. The aim of the study has been translated into the following three research questions:

1. In what degree do child welfare investigators identify indications of possible psychosocial problems in juveniles undergoing a BARO because the police suspect them of having committed an offence?

2. Which specific risk and promotive factors are observed in juveniles undergoing a BARO because the police suspect them of having committed an offence?

3. Which indications of possible psychosocial problems and risk and promotive factors exist in juveniles undergoing a BARO for violating the Compulsory Education Act?

In this summary we limit ourselves to the outlines of the study.

**Research method**

The information used for this study was obtained by child welfare investigators using a BARO. The BARO questionnaire is being used as a basic screening instrument. The information in this study was obtained from juveniles, and their parents. The BARO questionnaire addresses factors related to various psychosocial domains, which together may provide indications of possible psychosocial problems. Child welfare investigators identified the degree of concern in respect of these various domains and recorded these on an assessment form. This information is used at the first stage of this study. In order to be able to examine the degree in which specific factors exist, the child welfare investigators also filled in a scoring form, and juveniles completed a youth questionnaire. A total of 29 risk and promotive factors, both static and dynamic are used in this study. These factors relate to characteristics in the individual domain (background characteristics, history of problem behaviour, temperament, behaviour, and lifestyle); the family domain (divorce, family member having contact with the police, bond with parents, parenting style, and family member abusing substances); and the wider social environment (friends having contact with the police, school results, behaviour at school, and relationships with teachers). For interventions, it is particularly important to gain insight into the dynamic factors.

A cross-sectional retrospective study was carried out among a large group of juveniles aged between 12 and 18 years who were screened by the Board in the period between October 2007 and April 2008. The Board selected the juveniles and collected the data. In total, 1,600 BARO questionnaires and youth questionnaires were issued. Information about 769 juveniles was collected and the data of 737 juveniles is used in this study. In comparison to the total population of juveniles who were screened using a BARO in 2006, there is an under-representation in the current sample of juveniles aged between 16 and 18 years, juveniles from the West of the
Netherlands, and juveniles who were suspected of property offences. Our sample includes relatively more juveniles who were suspected of violent offences and juveniles who were screened because of violating the Compulsory Education Act.

The degree of concern as an indication for possible psychosocial problems
Chapter 4 reports on the first research question. We examined the degree in which the child welfare investigators expressed concerns about juveniles in respect of eight domains. This considers the child welfare investigators’ concerns related to possible psychological or behavioural problems, dysfunctional behaviour in the contexts of family, school and leisure time, and to the characteristics of the environments in which the juveniles live. In nearly one third of the juveniles the investigators expressed ‘much’ to ‘very much’ concern about at least one out of the eight domains. The percentage of juveniles about whom the child welfare investigators expressed concern about possible psychosocial problems is comparable to that from other Dutch studies. Indications for possible psychosocial problems were observed more frequently in juveniles who were screened by the Board than in juveniles in a general population, but less frequently than in juveniles who had been brought before the juvenile court, or in juveniles in correctional institutions for juvenile offenders. The child welfare investigators expressed most concern about the domain related to externalising problems (identified in 16% of the juveniles) and the least concern about the domain related to substance abuse/gambling (identified in 6% of the juveniles). In respect of factors involved in the way the juveniles are functioning, the child welfare investigators expressed most concern about school performance (identified in 15% of the juveniles).

An accumulation of possible psychosocial problems is found in a small part of the group of juveniles. The child welfare investigators expressed ‘much’ to ‘very much’ concern with respect to two or more domains in one fifth of the juveniles. Concerns about psychological or behavioural problems were related to disfunctioning in the family, at school or in leisure time.

Differences in the degree of concern among subgroups
In none of the eight psychosocial domains did the child welfare investigators identify any differences among juveniles in the different age groups (12-13 years, 14-15 years, and 16-18 years), nor among juveniles who were suspected of having committed violent offences, property offences or other offences. Boys and girls and juveniles from different groups of ethnic origin only differed in respect of the domain of leisure time. The child welfare investigators expressed concern about leisure activities more frequently in the case of boys and in Moroccan, Antillean, Surinamese, and other juveniles of non-Western heritage than in the case of girls and native
Dutch juveniles, Turkish juveniles, and other non-Dutch juveniles from western backgrounds.
In respect of most psychosocial domains, the child welfare investigators more frequently expressed concern about juveniles who had previously been in contact with the police than in first offenders. The child welfare investigators more frequently identified externalising problems and dysfunctional behaviour in leisure time in the first than in the latter group.

The absence of differences among subgroups does not conform with literature. Research shows for instance that internalising problems are observed more frequently in girls than in boys. A possible explanation for the absence of such expected differences may be that some juveniles with psychosocial problems have already come into contact with care facilities at an early stage, and do not come into contact with the Board through the police (this is, for instance, confirmed by the results obtained regarding truants, see below). Another explanation may be that, in respect of these girls, the cases mainly involved externalising behavioural problems, for this is why they ended up in contact with the Board. A third explanation may be that a BARO is not sensitive enough to point out differences in possible psychosocial problems among subgroups. In other words, the information on the assessment form of the BARO questionnaire is not suitable for making clinical distinctions (e.g. in externalising and internalising behaviour) among subgroups. This is, however, not what the BARO is intended for, because, if necessary, a personality assessment is administered in a follow-up programme. The information included in the assessment form mainly represents the view of the child welfare investigator and is not intended to make clear distinctions among subgroups.

**Risk and promotive factors**
Chapter 5 deals with the second research question. The static risk factors observed most frequently are ‘gender’ and previous contact with the police. Eight out of ten juveniles are male and more than half the number of juveniles had previously been in contact with the police. Static risk factors related to the family situation were observed in a considerable number of the juveniles. In one third of the juveniles, the parents were divorced or a family member had previously been in contact with the police.

The child welfare investigators identified dynamic risk factors in the individual domain in a considerable number of the juveniles (varying from one out of ten to one out of three). Characteristics of impulsive behaviour occurred in more than one third of the juveniles. It was also revealed that one third of the juveniles had risky lifestyles (frequently out on the street with friends and/or substance abuse). Consistent with the literature, our study revealed that impulsive behaviour proved to be a major risk factor in
juveniles who had previously been in contact with the police. It is known from literature that impulsive behaviour is a major risk factor for both delinquency and recidivism.

Dynamic risk factors in the child-rearing environment were less frequently identified in juveniles who underwent a BARO (in one out of ten juveniles at most), whereas promotive factors in the child-rearing environment were observed in approximately two thirds of the juveniles. The degree in which child welfare investigators identified risks in the child-rearing environment corresponds with the lowest prevalence observed in juveniles who stay in correctional institutions for juvenile offenders. Although it is possible that our study underestimated the risks in the child-rearing environment due to the assessment method used, the results at least suggest that in a considerable number of the juveniles who underwent a BARO the child-rearing environment included favourable factors.

The risk factor identified most frequently in the wider social environment is friends having contact with the police. More than four out of ten juveniles had friends who had also been in contact with the police. Literature reveals that having delinquent friends is related to exhibiting delinquent behaviour oneself, but that its predictive value as a risk factor for recidivism is relatively small.

Accumulation of and association among risk and promotive factors

Literature reveals that an accumulation of criminogenic risks and the absence of promotive factors relates to an increased probability of persistent serious delinquency. In nearly one out of ten juveniles the child welfare investigators identified seven or more risk factors. The more risk factors that were identified in juveniles, the less promotive factors, on average, that were present. On the other hand, in three out of ten juveniles the child welfare investigators did not identify more than one criminogenic risk factor. On average, these juveniles appeared to have the most promotive factors.

Some risk and promotive accumulation scores occurred together more frequently than others. The strongest associations were observed between behavioural problems with other risks within the individual domain and with risks in other domains. Consistent with literature, we found that juveniles with risk factors in the individual domain more frequently had risk factors in the family or school domain. The associations among factors were not equal for all subgroups. This is discussed in further detail below.

Boys and girls: the ‘gender paradox’?

Boys and girls hardly differed from each other in respect of the types of risk or promotive factors, but more so in respect of the accumulation of risk factors and in the associations between some factors. In girls, there
is more frequently a question of an accumulation of static family risks and the absence of individual buffers. These results confirm the ‘gender paradox’. This paradox implies that girls commit offences less frequently than boys, but that risk factors are observed more frequently in girls who come into contact with the criminal justice system than in boys, irrespective of whether they have previously been in contact with the judicial system. There seems to be a threshold effect, which means that problems in several areas were observed in girls even before they came into contact with the judicial system. Irrespective of the fact that our results correspond to other studies, we nevertheless note that the assessment instruments used mainly assessed factors that, according to literature, clearly relate to delinquency of boys. But even if gender-specific risk factors had been assessed better, this would not have altered the conclusions.

The associations among (an accumulation of) risk and promotive factors in boys and girls were not equal. We found that compared to boys behavioural problems in girls are more closely associated with criminogenic risk factors in the family and with the absence of a promotive factor in the family. Behavioural problems in boys, on the other hand, are more closely associated with a risky lifestyle than in girls. Although the study revealed that the same criminogenic factors were present in boys and girls, our results also consequently suggest that the associations among different risk and promotive factors differ between genders. The results are consistent with recent literature, but require further examination.

Age groups: differences in types of risk and promotive factors
The differences in age were mainly observed in respect of the types of risk and promotive factors. In the youngest age group (juveniles aged between 12-13 years) the risk factors mainly related to the individual domain or to the absence of protection in the domain of the family, whereas in the case of older age groups there were (also) more frequently risks in the wider social environment or factors which strongly related to the wider social environment (substance abuse, spending much time out on the street). This is not surprising, as the social environment of older juveniles expand. The findings from our study show that in respect of the risk and promotive factors at different ages, juveniles who come into contact with the police do not differ from juveniles in the general population. The results are consistent with a developmental-ecological perspective which states that in each different stage of life there are different factors that have a prominent effect on individual behaviour. In childhood, individual characteristics and parents play a prominent part in the behaviour of their children. As the children grow older, the importance of school increases and during adolescence the influence of friends and the wider social environment increase.
Ethnic origin groups
Our research shows that the native Dutch juveniles and those of foreign heritage who underwent a BARO hardly differed from each other in the prevalence in which different types of risk and promotive factors were observed. Substance abuse, previous provision of mental healthcare, and attention problems, however, appeared to occur more frequently in juveniles of foreign heritage than in native Dutch juveniles. Compared to native Dutch juveniles who come into contact with the police, the study showed that juveniles from minority groups less frequently had previous contact with care facilities for their problems. These findings are also consistent with literature.

There also appeared to be hardly any difference among the origin groups regarding the accumulation of risk factors. An interesting finding was that in Moroccan juveniles, on average, fewer risk factors were observed than in other origin groups. This finding may be interpreted as follows: it appears that, besides their delinquent behaviour, there are, on average, fewer problems identified with respect to this group of juveniles than with juveniles from other origin groups. These findings may, however, also suggest a bias occurring in the questioning of the informers who are asked questions about a juvenile (the juvenile him or herself and his or her parents). The consequence may be that by relying on the BARO, the conclusion may be that there is hardly anything, or nothing, wrong with juveniles from some minority groups, such as the Moroccans, while this cannot be established properly for this specific group by merely consulting a parent and juvenile. The views of parents and juveniles on the presence of possible criminogenic risk factors may sometimes differ from the views held by the child welfare investigator. This has consequences for the formulation of recommendations to the public prosecutor or to the juvenile court and for the decisions to be made about prosecuting these juveniles in the judicial chain (e.g. it is less frequently possible to provide an intervention).

Suspects of violence, property offences, or other offences
There are hardly any differences in risk and promotive factors among suspects of violence offences, property offences or other offences. As expected, aggression was observed more frequently in offenders of violent offences than in juveniles who were suspected of other types of offences. The absence of differences among suspects of different types of offences in the child-rearing environment is, however, unexpected on the basis of literature. It is conceivable that characteristics of the child-rearing environment were not assessed sufficiently. But this unexpected result could also be due to the absence of information about the nature of previous offences committed by juveniles who had previously been in contact with the police, as a result of which it was not possible to compose groups of juveniles who had specialised in specific types of offences.
Juveniles who have previously been in contact with the police: risk factors in several domains

Juveniles who have previously been in contact with the police are clearly distinguishable from first offenders. Important risk factors, that were identified more frequently in juveniles who had previously been in contact with the police than in first offenders, were impulsive behaviour and suspension from school. Literature shows that impulsive behaviour is an important risk factor for delinquency or persisting delinquency. Suspension from school is a signal for underlying risk factors which are also manifested in the school environment. The underlying risk factors may possibly be the same for problem behaviour at school and (persistent) delinquency.

In addition, we found that the presence of parental supervision and being a member of a sports club were observed less frequently in juveniles who have previously been in contact with the police than in first offenders. Parental supervision of a child’s leisure activities also appears to be an important promotive factor in literature. It should however be noted, that during adolescence the parents’ knowledge of their child’s behaviour frequently relates to openness of a juvenile about his activities. Positive interaction patterns between parent and child are important for the attitude and behaviour of both. It is also known from literature that practising sports as a member of a club constitutes a promotive factor against delinquency.

Juveniles who have previously been in contact with the police: age differences in types of risk and promotive factors

The results also point to age differences with regard to the type of risk factors which are important in juveniles who have previously been in contact with the police. Behavioural problems (impulsive behaviour and oppositional behaviour) and the absence of parental supervision were observed more frequently in adolescents who had already been in contact with the police at an early age than in recidivists in older age groups. These findings are consistent with a developmental path that is known in literature as ‘early starters’. In this group of juveniles there more frequently was an accumulation of individual and family risk factors than in other delinquent juveniles. In juveniles who had come into contact with the police early in adolescence, risk factors in the individual domain and the child-rearing environment are consequently key factors for persisting in delinquent behaviour.

Juveniles who have previously been in contact with the police: accumulation of risks and the absence of protection

We also found that an accumulation of risk factors over several domains was clearly related to having previous contact with the police. These results confirm the ‘accumulation of risks’ hypothesis which suggests
that as risk factors accumulate the probability of persistent offending increases. Our study also showed that an accumulation of promotive factors relate, both directly and indirectly, with a decreasing likelihood of previous police contacts. Our findings are consistent with the notion that promotive factors are related to an decreased likelihood of delinquency or recidivism (the ‘promotive or compensatory factor’ hypothesis) and that these factors can decrease the association between risk factors and recidivism (the ‘protective factor’ hypothesis). We should, however, state that we have cross-sectional data. Nevertheless, longitudinal studies also reveal that an accumulation of promotive factors over several domains has a diminishing effect on persistent delinquent behaviour over time, just as they can suppress the effects of risks on problematic behaviour of juveniles.

Truants referred to the board versus non-truants: an effect of referral
With regard to truants who underwent a screening by the Board, the child welfare investigators identified indications of possible psychosocial problems, an accumulation of criminogenic risk factors and an absence of promotive factors more often and to a greater degree than in non-truants. Our findings mainly show that this is an effect of referral. The school attendance officers were highly concerned about specific juveniles who chronically skipped school and they referred these juveniles to the Board for further testing. The child welfare investigators also expressed much concern about these juveniles and hereby confirmed the vision of the school attendance officers. In addition, the child welfare investigator also frequently identified risk factors in these truants as well. It may therefore be assumed that the group of truants who were screened does not represent the entire group of chronic and non-chronic truants.

Limitations of this study
The results of this study were based on a cross-sectional sample and consequently only provide a sample section of the possible psychological problems and risk and promotive factors identified by child welfare investigators in juveniles who were screened by the Board at a specific moment of time. We cannot say anything about the causes of delinquency or recidivism, nor about the predictive value of the factors examined in this study for possible recidivism of juveniles in this research group. In addition, this study involved a research group selected through selective sampling. The results regarding indications for possible psychosocial problems and risk and promotive factors cannot be extrapolated, without restrictions, to the entire group of juveniles who were screened using a BARO. Our results, for instance, do not relate to special groups such as mentally handicapped juveniles, addicted juveniles, or sex offenders. For the purpose of this research, we furthermore depended on the information obtained by using the BARO questionnaire. This information is
a ‘clinical’ interpretation by child welfare investigators of information obtained from parents and juveniles. A study using standardised quantitative assessment instruments, and different sources of information would be more desirable to gain more accurate insights in the prevalence of criminogenic risk factors and promotive factors in juveniles. We do not think, however, that the restrictions prevent us from accomplishing the purpose of this research; which is to provide an initial exploratory analysis of possible problems and risk and promotive factors identified by the child welfare investigators in juveniles undergoing a screening.

Relevance to the Interventions

Proceeding from the notion that the interventions should respond to the risk and promotive factors of the target population, the results of our study have the following relevance for the interventions to be provided. It must be stated first and foremost that this research involved a selective research group, as a result of which the findings cannot simply be extrapolated to the entire population of juveniles undergoing a screening by the Child Protection Board. The individual criminogenic risk factors that occurred most frequently related to behavioural problems – with impulsive behaviour being identified most frequently – and to a risky lifestyle. A cognitive behavioural therapeutic approach, whether or not in combination with a social skills training, is amongst other things targeted at this risk factor (impulsive behaviour). In some cases (e.g. in the event of ADD or ADHD), medication in combination with behavioural interventions will be necessary. Our findings also indicate that training programmes targeted at changing the lifestyles of these juveniles would be desirable. We furthermore conclude that in a small number of juveniles there were risk factors in the child-rearing environment present, and in a considerable number of juveniles promotive factors were present in the family environment. Family interventions, such as (light forms of) parental support or parental skills training programmes, target such factors.

In the broader social environment, the risk factor of having delinquent friends was observed most frequently. Relevant interventions should be targeted at reducing the influence of delinquent peers and encouraging the influence of pro-social friends. Risk factors in the school situation only occurred in a small number of juveniles whereas promotive factors in the school domain, on the other hand, were observed in considerably more juveniles. Interventions at school, which also use cognitive behavioural methods or which are targeted at enhancing self-control or at increasing social skills, could be relevant in this case.

This study furthermore showed that out of the juveniles undergoing a BARO, the number of girls for whom ‘something’ was wrong was larger than the number of boys. These findings imply that the interventions need not necessarily be gender specific, but that girls will expectedly need
intensive and multi-modal interventions (interventions targeted at several domains) more frequently than boys. The findings that there are age differences in the degree in which some risk and promotive factors occur and in the prevalence of risk and promotive factors in juveniles who have previously been in contact with the police suggest that interventions are required that are targeted at the developmental stage of the child. In early adolescence, the types of risk and promotive factors are often different from those in late adolescence. These findings also suggest the importance of using multi-modal interventions with young recidivists. It should be noted, however, that further research is required into the effects of multi-modal interventions and the applicable contraindications.

An important supplementation from literature to this approach is that in the case of juveniles who run hardly any risk of starting a criminal career, such treatment may be counterproductive and is therefore advised against. This applies to a considerable number of the juveniles who were screened by the Board. Literature also shows that isolating juveniles in high-risk groups due to group pressure can also be counterproductive. Finally, we must conclude that on the basis of this analysis it is not possible to make conclusive recommendations about interventions and any specific distinctions in this area. This is beyond the scope of this study.