



Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute
Engelberg Center for Children and Youth



Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services
Research, Planning and Training Division
Juvenile Probation Service of the
Division of Youth Development and Correction Services

Characteristics and Needs of Minors in the Care of the Juvenile Probation Service

Paula Kahan-Strawczynski ♦ Dganit Levi

The study was initiated by the Research, Planning and Training Division,
and the Juvenile Probation Service of the Division of Youth Development
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Executive Summary

1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of a study of minors in the care of the Juvenile Probation Service (JPS), which is a social-therapeutic service operating nationwide from within the Division of Youth Development and Correction Services at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services. The service works with minors aged 12-18 of both sexes, who have been referred by the Israel Police on suspicion of criminal offenses and those who have been found guilty of an offense and have been referred for treatment by court order. In 2009, the service treated 20,098 minors, the majority of them male (87%).

The JPS has three units:

1. ***The Intake, Screening and Assessment (ISA) Unit*** accepts all minors suspected of an offense by the Israel Police. The probation officers in this unit conduct a psychosocial investigation to assess the circumstances and needs of the minors, based on which they submit an opinion to the police and the courts, They also provide support to the minors through the legal process and explain to the minors and their parents the goals of the service and the way it works.
2. ***The Detention Unit*** works with minors who have been arrested on suspicion of an offense. The probation officers conduct a psychosocial investigation while the minors are detained in order to assess their condition and to look into alternatives to detention. The officers supervise the minors while they are in the alternative detention facilities and support them during their detention and trial.
3. ***The Treatment and Rehabilitation (TR) Unit*** works with minors for whom a temporary injunction has been issued by the probation officer and treatment orders issued after the minors have been found guilty of an offense and the judge has ruled that there is a need for treatment. Minors referred to this unit by order are obligated to receive the treatment as ruled by the court.

In the past two decades, the number and characteristics of referrals to the JPS have changed, and this has affected the attitude of the system towards them. Among the main changes: an increase in the gravity of the illegal behavior; changes in legislation concerning this population (the Detention Law and the Public Defense Law); an increase in police manpower working with youth, and changes in the way that the police conduct their work.

However, there is no up-to-date comprehensive data on the characteristics and needs of those in the care of the JPS and the interventions they receive to support these changes. The service does have a data system, which is used to collect data methodically about minors referred. The data includes details of the types and characteristics of the offenses as well as basic personal information. Personal and other family characteristics relevant to the treatment, such as assessment of risk situations of the youth and their families and contact with other services, are not recorded. It was only in 2009 that a new, state-of-the-art computerized reporting system was

introduced, giving additional, but still limited, information – hence the need for a study of the characteristics and needs of minors referred to the JPS in general and of those in the care of each of the three units (ISA, Detention, and TR).

The study was commissioned by the Division for Youth Development and Correction Services, Juvenile Probation Service, and the Research, Planning and Training Division of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services. It was overseen by a steering committee made up of representatives of both divisions and the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute. The committee participated in constructing the questionnaire and served as a forum for discussion of the study findings. The findings have also been presented at other forums of the Juvenile Probation Service and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, including the JPS national conference, and to the JPS district probation officers. The JPS is continuing to study and discuss the findings with the goal of improving its work practices and making them more suitable for the minors in its care.

2. The Study

The study goal was to help decision makers in the JPS understand the main characteristics and needs of its target population in order to develop informed policy to improve the interventions provided and to develop the necessary programs.

The study population comprised males only, aged 12-18, who were in the care of the service when the study was conducted.

The sample was constructed as follows:

1. The sample from the ISA unit was taken from minors who had been referred because a criminal case had been opened and the psychosocial investigation had been concluded. The sample did not include minors whose case had been closed by the police or those whose psychosocial investigation had not yet been ordered.
2. The sample from the detention unit included minors for whom a detention disposition had been requested and minors with a detention probation order, i.e., those who, as an alternative to detention, had been released with restrictive conditions, among them the requirement to report to the probation officer.
3. The sample from the TR unit included minors who had been referred for treatment at the JPS by court order.

The data were gathered using a questionnaire completed by the probation officers about the minors who had been referred to the service. The self-report questionnaires were completed on-line using an Internet survey program. The data were collected from August to December 2009 for a representative national sample of 450 minors. A random sample of 150 minors was taken from each of the units separately. Altogether, information was received about 430 minors – 96% of the sample.

In the data analysis, the data were weighted according to the percentage of minors from each of the units within the total study population. Analyses were conducted by unit, age, sector and country of origin (immigrants from the former Soviet Union [FSU] vs. non-immigrants). In addition to the collection of quantitative data, there were five face-to-face interviews with minors in the care of the JPS, giving them the chance to make themselves heard and present their perceptions of the treatment they were receiving and their needs and wishes.

3. Main Findings

a. Characteristics of the Minors

Sociodemographic Characteristics

- ◆ 40% of the minors were aged 12-15 and 60% were 16-18. In the ISA unit, there was a higher percentage of 12-15-year-olds (46%), while in the other two units, there was a higher percentage of 16-18-year-olds (over 70%).
- ◆ 81% of the minors were born in Israel. Among those born abroad, 11% were born in the FSU and 4% in Ethiopia; the remainder were born in other countries.
- ◆ 81% were Jewish; the remainder were Arab (almost all of them, Muslim).
- ◆ Religiously, about two-thirds had a non-observant lifestyle; over a quarter were traditional and a small percentage of them were religious or very religious.

Main Occupation

Over three-quarters of the minors were studying: 67% did not have another occupation; 11% combined study with a job. Of the remainder, 9% had jobs and were not studying and 13% had dropped out of the system and were neither working nor studying. Some variance was found among the minors: Most of the 12-15-year-olds (83%) were studying and did not have another occupation, compared with just over half (56%) of the 16-18-year-olds. Over two-thirds of the Jewish minors (69%) were studying and did not have another occupation, compared with about half (55%) of the Arabs.

Schooling

- ◆ Less than half of the minors (43%) were at regular schools. About a fifth (22%) were at technical or vocational schools and about a third (35%) studied in alternative frameworks (e.g., the HILA complementary education program for school-excluded youth, and detoxification centers).
 - By unit: About half of the minors in the ISA unit were at regular schools, compared with a third of those in the other two units. A relatively high percentage of the minors (about half) in the Detention and TR units were in alternative frameworks
 - By sector: Technical schools were attended by 43% of the Arabs compared with 18% of the Jews; alternative frameworks served only 12% of the Arabs compared with 39% of the Jews.

- ◆ About two-thirds of those at school met most of the requirements of the school. Of the remainder, some met the requirements some of the time, while others did not meet the requirements at all.
- ◆ Those at school were absent on average for 1.1 months in the course of the school year for reasons other than sickness or vacation.

Minors Not in School

On average, those who had dropped out of school had completed 9 years of schooling. The main reasons for dropping out of school were behavioral problems, absenteeism, disciplinary problems and low scholastic achievements. A significant proportion of those who had dropped out (41%) were currently looking for another study framework. Eighteen percent of the minors in the ISA unit had dropped out, compared with about a third of those in the other two units. About half of the dropouts in the ISA unit were currently looking for a new study framework, compared with about a third of those in the TR unit and a quarter of those in the detention unit.

Risk Situations and Risk-Increasing Situations

Clearly, all the minors in the care of the JPS were in some form of risk situation or in situations that increase risk. As an additional method of ascertaining their characteristics, the probation officers were asked to report on the risk situations or risk-increasing situations that minors in their care were facing at the time of interview or had faced in the past. What stands out in their reports is that the minors in the Detention and TR units were in risk situations and situations that increased risk to a greater extent than those in the ISA unit. Learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders stood out as risk-increasing situations (the probation officers reported these in regard to 58% of the minors). The most common risk situations were: associating with friends who broke the law (41%), emotional difficulties (35%) and loitering (27%).

Minors' Relationship with the Services prior to their Referral to the JPS

This is an important issue because it indicates whether the minors were known to the services prior to their referral and, if so, to which services – i.e., whether the minors were known to service providers and had had the chance to receive treatment, which could have prevented the situation from deteriorating, or whether they had not been known to the services and their first introduction to a care situation had been through the JPS.

- ◆ Contact with any service: Over three-quarters of the minors had been in contact with some service for youth and a quarter of these had been in contact with 3 or more services. The most common service was provided by members of the school staff, such as a counselor or psychologist (51% of the minors).
 - By sector: The great majority (85%) of minors in the Jewish sector had been in contact with some service, compared with less than half (46%) of those in the Arab sector. Thirty percent of those in the Jewish sector had been in contact with 3 or more services, compared with 15% of the Arab minors.

- ◆ Contact with a service for youth at risk: Over half of the minors (54%) had been in contact with a service for youth at risk, such as the Kidum Noar Youth Advancement service or the truancy service. The most common service found was social workers in the social service department (38% of the minors).
 - By sector: More than twice as many minors in the Jewish sector than the Arab sector had been in contact with a service for youth at risk – 60% vs. 27%, respectively.

In general, the functional characteristics of the minors in the ISA unit, the youngsters aged 12-15, and the Jewish minors were more normative and they were characterized by less extreme risk-increasing situations, with regard to their sociodemographic characteristics than were the minors in the other two units, youngsters aged 16-18, and the Arab minors.

b. Family Environment

As a rule, for young people the family plays a key role in promoting and maintaining their physical and mental well-being – and all the more so in the case of illegal behaviors. The way that parents respond to their child's situation, their attitude to him, and the treatment they give him may play a very significant role in his rehabilitation.

Family Characteristics

- ◆ A very high percentage of the minors (38%) were from single-parent families, compared with 8.7% of all minors aged 0-18 in Israel.
- ◆ The percentage of minors from large families (more than 4 children) was also high – 59% vs. 34% among all children in Israel.
- ◆ Approximately 60% of the mothers were born in Israel, about a fifth in the FSU, a tenth in Ethiopia; the remainder were born elsewhere.
- ◆ The mothers had a low level of education: 42% had less than 11 years of schooling and 39% had 12 years.
- ◆ There were no wage earners in a quarter of the families. This is not surprising, since the probation officers reported that about a fifth of the families had difficulty providing even the basic needs for their family and about 44% could provide only the basic needs.
- ◆ In the previous 3 years, some 60% of the minors had experienced a domestic situation or event liable to undermine the stability and functioning of the family, such as divorce, protracted unemployment of one of the parents, severe illness or the arrest or imprisonment of one of the parents.
- ◆ Over a quarter of the minors had a parent or sibling who had been involved in illegal behaviors and about a sixth of the minors had a close family member addicted to drugs or alcohol.
- ◆ 54% of the families were known to the social services in the community. This is the same percentage as that of minors in contact with one of the services for youth at risk.

Relationship between the Minors and their Families and the Perception of the Families of the Status of the Minors

- ◆ It was reported that there was great tension between more than half of the minors and their families, that there were numerous arguments between them and/or rejection or even estrangement from one or both parents. It was also found that 58% of the families defended the minor, blaming the victim or someone else or denying that the minor had committed a crime.
- ◆ Notwithstanding these worrying data, it was reported that the parents of 77% of the minors had positive expectations of them and supported them. In the case of over half of the minors, the probation officers reported that the parents had a positive approach to dealing with the offense that their children were suspected of having committed: they helped them to accept responsibility, understood the seriousness of the offense and confronted them with the significance and gravity of the offense (reports of at least one of the above behaviors). The probation officers reported that in the case of 64% of the minors, their families were very involved in the planning and implementation of their rehabilitation.

Importantly, the attitudes of parents towards the illegal behaviors of which their children are suspected are not mutually exclusive. There may be cases in which the parents understand the gravity of the illegal behavior but support their children nevertheless. Furthermore, parents do not always agree with each another.

c. Events and Difficulties that Lead to Illegal Behavior in Minors

- ◆ Emotional barriers including emotional difficulties, uncontrolled temper and urges, and a lack of insight of the minors about their own situation and needs: The probation officers estimated that difficulties in this area led to illegal behavior among 90% of the minors.
- ◆ The most prominent domestic difficulties were relationships with the parents or other family members, a traumatic event in the family and financial hardship. Such difficulties and events were reported for 61% of the minors.
- ◆ The difficulties of functioning within a framework consisted mainly of learning difficulties as well as concentration and attention deficit disorders, which were reported for 62% of the minors.
- ◆ Difficulties with limits and authority including the absence thereof as well as the lack of a supportive or therapeutic framework were noted for 59% of the minors.
- ◆ Non-normative behavior including association with juvenile delinquents, use of psychoactive substances, and antisocial values and opinions were reported for about half of the minors.

d. Characteristics of the Illegal Behaviors

- ◆ About a third of the minors had one criminal case;¹ about a quarter, 2 cases; about a tenth, 3 cases; another third had 4 or more criminal cases. Note that the JPS data show that for 11,167 of the 24,300 criminal cases opened for minors at the Juvenile Probation Service in 2008, there was no indictment (46% of the cases). In some instances, the probation officers recommended the case be closed after the psychosocial examination in the ISA unit; in some cases, the minor had reached the age of 18; some cases were closed due to the statute of limitations or lack of public interest.
- ◆ The minors in the detention unit had been arrested on average 2.2 times (including the current detention). In contrast, the minors in the ISA and TR units had been arrested on average 0.35 times.
- ◆ The predominant offense groups were: violence, for which 60% of the minors had at least one criminal section and property offenses (50% of the minors).
 - By unit: Obviously, the characteristics of the illegal behaviors of minors in the ISA unit were milder than those of the minors in the other two units. For example, 28% of the minors in the ISA unit had 4 or more criminal cases, compared with 43% of those in the detention unit and 67% of those in the TR unit.
 - By age: As expected, the illegal behaviors of those aged 16-18 were graver than the 12-15-year-olds. For example, 41% of those in the older group had been arrested at least once, compared with 28% of those in the younger group.
 - By origin: The characteristics of the minors from the FSU were of greater concern than those of the non-immigrants. Fifty-seven percent of the former had at least 4 criminal cases, compared with 31% of the non-immigrants.
 - By sector: The only difference found was in regard to arrests: 40% of the Arabs had been arrested at least once, compared with 25% of the Jews.

e. Summary Measure of Negative Behaviors

The minors in the care of the Juvenile Probation Service are characterized by a range of risk situations or risk-increasing situations. In order to focus on minors at increased risk, we built a summary measure of 7 situations of increased risk. The measure included two risk-increasing situations – no wage earner in the family and at least three family events (e.g., divorce or separation of the parents, death of a sibling, one or both parents becoming unemployed) – and the following risk situations for the minor: he is neither working nor in an educational framework, has a psychiatric background or has tried to commit suicide, uses drugs, is physically aggressive towards his parents, or has been arrested twice or more.

Forty-four percent of the minors were not characterized by any of the situations of increased risk; 29% were characterized by one situation of increased risk, 13% by two situations of increased

¹ All current and past criminal cases including open cases, cases that have been closed, criminal cases in which the youth has been found guilty and criminal cases whose status is "other."

risk and 14% by 3 or more situations of increased risk. These situations were more prominent among the minors in the Detention and TR units and among the children of single-parent families. The great majority of the minors characterized by several situations of increased risk (3 or more) had been in contact with some service for youth at risk prior to referral to the JPS and their families were known to the social services in the community.

f. Treatment of Minors

In this section, we present the findings about the treatment provided by the Juvenile Probation Service. The information is important as a basis for development of the service, so that the minors receive optimum treatment and help with their rehabilitation.

Focuses of the Work of the JPS

Work in the JPS focuses on three areas:

1. Addressing illegal behaviors, including working through the offense with the minor, getting him to stop the illegal behavior and recognize the harm it has caused, and providing him with an opportunity to rectify it. This is at the heart of the work with 70% of the minors.
2. Addressing the functioning of the minors in their lives and in their work or educational frameworks, including improving their functioning, monitoring their functioning within a framework, setting limits and monitoring ability to set a daily schedule, and referral to an appropriate care framework. The probation officers reported that they addressed these issues in their work with 72% of the minors.
3. Giving consideration to the minor in his social environment, including sensitive work on the relationship of the minor with his parents and his friends, working with the parents of the minor, and providing group therapy for the minor. This is included in work with 39% of the minors.

Differences were found among the units: these 3 areas were more prevalent among minors in the Detention and TR units than among those in the ISA unit. This finding is consistent with the characteristics of the 3 units: the ISA unit focuses on diagnosing the status of the minor rather than on treatment.

Individual Treatment and Participation in JPS Programs

- ◆ Most of the minors have individual meetings with the probation officers to assess their situation and examine the treatment they are receiving.
- ◆ In addition, the service implements programs and group therapy: Mediation, Kedem family group conferences for juvenile offenders, Kedem family group conferences for detainees, Kedem family group conferences to develop treatment programs, a law and justice workshop, New Beginnings (*Sikkuyim*), Employment Field and *Derekh Hamelekh* ("the King's Way"), violence and anger management groups, and groups for sex offenders, for those who have been driving without a license, drug users, for detainees and for parents.

- At the time of the study, about a sixth of the minors were participating in one of the JPS programs or groups.
- A significant percentage (44%) had participated at some time (including at the time of interview) in one of the programs.
- According to the probation officers, the most prominent programs and groups that were needed – but not attended – by the minors were the group for detained juveniles and the violence and anger management groups.
- With regard to the minors who needed, but did not attend one of the programs, the probation officers noted the following main reasons: resistance from the minors and/or their parents, no suitable program, incompatible starting date, and need for the program to be culturally sensitive.

Relationship between the Probation Officers and the Families of the Minors

In general, the functioning of minors is affected by their relationships with their families. Similarly, support and assistance from the family is likely to have a great effect on the success of their rehabilitation and return to normative functioning. In light of this, the probation officers were asked to report whether they contacted the families to get information about the minors, to examine their relationship with their children and to involve them in the treatment process. In the case of most of the minors, the probation officers reported having some contact with the parents: 55% were in contact as needed and 33% were in regular contact. In addition, during the psychosocial examination in the ISA unit, the probation officers met the parents at least once in order to obtain information.

Relationship between the Probation Officers and Other Services

The probation officers were in contact with services relevant to the treatment of the minors, mostly as and when required, but in a few cases, in regular contact. The most predominant of these were the school staff, notably the school psychologist or counselor (61% of the minors) and social workers from the municipal social services department (49%).

Treatment by Court Order

The minors in the TR unit are referred to the service by court order.

- ◆ About two-thirds were referred to the TR unit by the ISA unit and about a third by the detention unit.
- ◆ The most prevalent orders for treatment in the TR unit were probation orders (40% of referrals) and temporary injunctions (31%).

Personal Strengths and Types of Support that Contribute to the Rehabilitation of the Minors

It is important to note the strengths of the minors and the types of support they receive, because these give an indication of the areas and factors to be fostered and they should be considered when planning treatment for the minors.

- ◆ The main strength likely to contribute to the rehabilitation of the minors, as noted by the probation officers, is functioning and/or perseverance in an educational framework or at work. At least one of these was noted with regard to 70% of the minors.
- ◆ Other strengths reported were a desire to change (regarding 60% of the minors), the absence of a criminal record (42%) and remorse (43%).
- ◆ The main types of support that can contribute to rehabilitation are from the family (which were noted in regard to 70% of the minors) and from therapeutic services (62%).

Difficulties with the Treatment of Minors

Examining the difficulties encountered in treating the minors will help to identify elements required in staff training and guidance and contribute to the search for additional interventions. The probation officers were asked to note up to 3 key difficulties they had to cope with in the treatment of the minors.

- ◆ The most prominent difficulties they reported were: refusal to accept responsibility for the offense committed (52%), difficulty getting the minors to cooperate with the treatment (40%) and the minors' perception that they themselves are the victims (20%).
- ◆ Difficulty getting the parents to cooperate was noted in regard to about a third of the minors (44% of the minors in the TR unit).
- ◆ The lack of culturally sensitive interventions was noted in regard to 11% of the minors – only 5% of the Jewish minors vs. 40% of the Arabs.

Contribution of the JPS to Minors in its Care

To achieve the study goals, the probation officers were asked to assess the contribution of the JPS to the minors in its care.

Evaluation of Intermediate Outcomes that Could Lead to the Achievement of the Final Outcomes for the Minors

- ◆ The probation officers estimated that 77% of the minors understood the work of the service to a great extent or to a very great extent. It is important to note this "intermediate outcome," since the minors were referred to the service by force of the law and did not refer themselves to it voluntarily. This obligates the probation officers to explain the goals of the service and the treatment and provide information about what is expected to happen.
- ◆ 71% were motivated to rehabilitate themselves.
- ◆ It was estimated that a relationship of trust had been established with 59% of the minors.
- ◆ In regard to 42% of the minors, it was believed that they met with the probation officer with the wish to change their situation and rehabilitate themselves and not merely because they were obliged to meet them.
- ◆ 51% regretted their actions and accepted responsibility for them. The service believes this to be an important step on the way to rehabilitation.

- ◆ With regard to 60% of the minors, the probation officers considered that they were already making progress towards rehabilitation.

Assessment of the Contribution of the Treatment at the Juvenile Probation Service

The probation officers were also asked to indicate up to two main contributions made by the JPS to the minors in its care: the following were noted in regard to about a third of the minors: establishing authority, accepting responsibility for the minor, getting the minor to recognize the problem, and treating the minor. With regard to about a fifth of the minors, the probation officers considered that their contribution was in bringing together and coordinating all the different treatment agencies.

Responding to the Needs of the Minors

With regard to the minors who had a court order for treatment in the TR unit, the probation officers were asked to consider which of the needs of the minors were being met either fully or partially. The reports concerned only those minors considered to have the needs in question.

- ◆ The need for which there was the highest success rate in finding a solution was for a place to live: a full solution was found for 60% and a partial solution for 31%.
- ◆ A full response was found for about half of the following needs: an educational framework or a job; help remaining within a framework; finding a supportive or therapeutic framework; and working through the offense.
- ◆ Diagnosing learning disabilities is a need for which only the most limited solution can be offered – 51% of the minors received no solution at all, 26% received a partial solution, and 23% had a full solution.
- ◆ A partial solution was found for the following: for 75% of minors with emotional needs and for 69% of those with a need to improve relationships with their parents and families.

4. Directions for Action

The study findings indicate several directions for further development of the service.

1. Continuing to concentrate efforts on changing the self-perception of the minors and their perception of their offense. Although the JPS does currently focus on the emotional state of the minors and working through the offense, there is room for strengthening, upgrading and intensifying this work.
2. Strengthening work on the main occupation of the minors: increasing their ability to remain within a framework, clarifying situations of dissatisfaction with the framework or poor functioning within it, and finding suitable frameworks for disengaged youth.
3. Expanding work with parents: increasing the involvement of the parents with planning and implementation of their children's treatment.
4. Continuing to develop JPS programs: examining the type, extent and deployment of existing programs in order to identify gaps between what is needed and what is currently available, as

the basis for developing new programs or expanding programs as necessary. Furthermore, it is necessary to expand the programs offered to Arab minors and ensure better synchronization between the starting dates of the programs and the needs of the minors.

5. Continuing to strengthen the work with external services and agencies and engaging additional agencies to improve the rehabilitation of the minors.
6. Giving special attention to minors with learning difficulties and/or attention and concentration disorders: intensifying staff training so they understand the subject and have the skills to work correctly with minors and their parents. In addition, a structured mechanism should be created for referring minors to the diagnostic and treatment services that are appropriate for their disabilities.
7. Taking note of difficulties experienced by the staff as the basis for staff training and instruction, e.g., how to cope when there is no cooperation on the part of the minor and his parents.

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