

# Risk Assessment With the START: AV in Dutch Secure Youth Care

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# IMPACT CHAPTER

## Scientific and Social Impact of This Dissertation

Secure residential youth care is the most intensive and restrictive type of specialized youth care available in the Netherlands. It is often described as a “last resort” for adolescents who experience difficulties adhering to other types of youth care (de Kruijf, 2019; ten Brummelaar et al., 2017). Adolescents admitted to court-mandated care represent a population with complex treatment needs: most of them suffer from multiple mental health problems and serious externalizing and internalizing behaviors, often as a result of complex trauma (Dresen et al., 2017, ten Brummelaar, 2017). These adolescents face many challenges and carry an accumulation of risk factors that makes them vulnerable to future adversities (Harder et al., 2015). Identifying these risk factors and addressing them with appropriate interventions may assist in preparing the adolescent (and their families) for a safe return into the community (de Valk, 2019). Therefore, structured risk assessment is relevant to the practice of secure youth care.

The use of risk assessment instruments in this setting has been recommended in various research papers (Harder, 2011; Vermaes et al., 2012) and policy documents (Inspectie Gezondheidszorg en Jeugd, 2019; Jeugdzorg Nederland, 2019). The youth care organization in which the present studies took place, OG Heldring institution (now: Pactum), identified the Short-Term Assessment of Risk and Treatability: Adolescent Version (START:AV; Viljoen et al., 2014) as a suitable risk assessment instrument. This instrument was primarily selected because adolescents residing within secure youth care experience heightened risk for multiple adverse outcomes and the START:AV is currently the only instrument for adolescents that allows the concurrent assessment of multiple risks.

The aim of this dissertation was to evaluate the START:AV implementation process as well as its key psychometric qualities within this specific setting. By exploring the implementation process and the field performance of the instrument, this dissertation contributes to insight into the utility of the START:AV in an applied setting. The overall conclusion is that the START:AV can be successfully implemented in a Dutch secure youth care setting, although we discovered specific barriers to implementation, which need to be taken into account in future implementation projects. We also demonstrated promising findings with respect to the START:AV’s interrater reliability and predictive validity in a field setting. To our knowledge, this was the first research conducted with the Dutch version of the START:AV user guide in a Dutch secure youth care setting.

### Scientific Impact

Recently, Viljoen and Vincent (2020) highlighted the need for more research into what works, where, and why with respect to implementation of risk assessment instruments. Increasing our understanding of the challenges typically faced when implementing risk assessment

instruments and how they affect implementation outcomes will help decision-making about the selection of implementation strategies to facilitate successful implementation. The current dissertation contributes to this knowledge gap by demonstrating how a risk assessment implementation process can be investigated, using constructs and frameworks from the field of implementation science. The study of risk assessment implementation is still in its infancy and this dissertation may help pave the way toward a more systematic and evidence-based approach to implementation evaluation.

Furthermore, this work demonstrated that a risk assessment instrument may perform less well (yet still adequately) in a practice setting under real-life conditions compared to lab studies under more controlled conditions. Given that risk assessment instruments are developed for use in practice, this line of research reiterates the importance of conducting field studies on the interrater reliability and predictive validity of risk assessment instruments. The majority of psychometric studies are nonfield studies, while findings from field studies are more generalizable to actual cases given that the conditions are more similar (Edens & Boccaccini, 2017). As more field reliability and validity studies become available, the generalizability of psychometric findings of risk assessment instruments can be examined by conducting a meta-analysis with “field study status” as a moderating variable (e.g., for variance in predictive validity; Edens & Boccaccini, 2017). This dissertation is therefore not only relevant for researchers specifically interested in the START:AV, it is directed towards all researchers with an interest in the practical application and implementation of risk assessment instruments in real-life settings. They may be encouraged by the findings and/or recommendations documented in this dissertation.



In order to reach the (risk assessment) research community, the studies were published in international peer-reviewed journals as well as presented at international conferences. Both types of knowledge dissemination were communicated via Twitter, to increase their reach and all publications (except for De Beuf et al., 2019) were published open access. Additionally, findings were presented to Dutch practitioners (e.g., CONRISQ knowledge festival), students (e.g., Master track Forensic Special Needs Education of Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands), and fellow researchers (e.g., presentation at the research department of a Dutch adult forensic mental health center).

## **Social Impact**

Given that this dissertation focuses on the implementation and utility of the START:AV in an applied setting, the clinical relevance of the findings is considerable. The studies provide an indication of how successful the START:AV can be implemented in secure youth care or similar residential services, as well as how the START:AV performs when used by professionals for risk management and treatment purposes. Although Dutch policy documents recommend conducting structured risk assessment in secure youth care services (Inspectie

Gezondheidszorg en Jeugd, 2019; Jeugdzorg Nederland, 2019), they do not refer to evidence-based and standardized instruments. They merely communicate the recommendation to assess risk and protective factors. Given the findings reported in this dissertation, the START:AV can be considered a suitable instrument for nation-wide implementation in secure youth care services, provided that further research is conducted. Furthermore, this dissertation provides suggestions to guide future risk assessment implementation initiatives. A more structured and evidence-based approach to risk assessment implementation can enhance implementation quality, which in turn may impact the effectiveness of these instruments in reducing future adverse outcomes for the involved adolescents.

On a societal/practical level, the findings and recommendations in this dissertation are relevant to stakeholders involved in risk assessment implementation. Most importantly, it may guide practitioners and policy advisors in their decisions concerning whether and how to implement the START:AV in their setting. Within the youth care organization where the studies were conducted the implementation of the START:AV did not only impact the treatment process, it also changed the annual patient evaluation report. That is, from 2019 on, the evaluation report includes an overview of the youth's strengths, vulnerabilities, and risks at the time of admission as well as an overview of changes in these strengths, vulnerabilities, and risks at discharge (compared to admission). Thus, the START:AV increased the goal-directedness and transparency of treatment planning and monitoring of treatment progress.

Additionally, over the past years, several activities were undertaken to make the information about the START:AV available to (Dutch-speaking) professionals in the youth care field. First, a Dutch version of the START:AV user guide and the rating forms was developed and published (De Beuf et al., 2016) and information about the instrument was published on a Dutch website ([www.start-av.nl](http://www.start-av.nl)). Knowledge of and experiences with (the implementation of) the START:AV were disseminated on multiple occasions and through various initiatives. At the most basic level, I provided information via email or (video) call to any professional who reached out. Most questions from practitioners concerned the relevance of the START:AV to their target population, however, I consistently used this opportunity to highlight the importance of a well-planned implementation. At a more organized level, I provided multiple presentations to various stakeholders in the Netherlands and Belgium; from colleagues in other secure youth care services to city council members, juvenile judges in training, and governmental policy advisors. On an international level, I shared my experiences with the START:AV with professionals working in juvenile detention centers in Macedonia and Lithuania. To support knowledge exchange, I organized an online symposium at the 2021 Annual Conference of the International Association of Forensic Mental Health Services, in which three START:AV implementation initiatives across Europe were presented. Furthermore, within the Netherlands, staff from seven of the 11 secure youth care providers attended a START:AV training (either by me or supervised by me) in which there was specific attention to the implementation process.

Implementation was further addressed during several START:AV user meetings in which experiences with or tips for using the START:AV were exchanged between professionals trained in the START:AV or those planning to use the START:AV in the future. Participants typically attended these user meetings to obtain advice on the practical application of the START:AV and to learn from the implementation experience at the OG Heldring Institution. Lastly, an article on the utility of the START:AV was published in a Dutch journal directed at practitioners in youth care (De Beuf et al., 2018) and a brief magazine (i.e., IN PRESS magazine) was created to provide an accessible Dutch summary of this dissertation to stakeholders in the youth care field.



