

Actual change

Evaluation of the recognition measures for victims
of violence in youth care



Summary

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“I think recognition involves: actually going for change together with those from the target group you have supposedly recognized.”

– Peer support representative

Background

Violence in youth care has been a significant topic in Dutch media, politics, and governance for many years. Recognition of historical, systemic, and/or institutional injustice is also a broader societal issue that has received increasing (academic) attention (see for instance National Ombudsman, 2023).

This study evaluates the recognition measures implemented by the Dutch government for those affected by violence in youth care, following the investigation by the De Winter Committee. In its 2019 report “Insufficiently protected: Violence in Dutch youth care from 1945 to the present,” the committee concluded that many who had resided in youth care institutions had experienced violence. The government was found to bear partial responsibility. The very first of the committee’s thirteen recommendations was to offer recognition to victims of violence in youth care.

In response, the Ministry of Justice and Security (*Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid*) and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (*Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport*) set up two project teams – project team ‘Follow-up to De Winter Recommendations’ and after that project team ‘The Implementation of De Winter Measures’ (project teams JenV/VWS) – to act on these recommendations. Based on their advice, the government introduced the following recognition measures, which are the focus of this report:

Measure 1: Official apologies

On the day the De Winter report was presented, then-ministers Hugo de Jonge and Sander Dekker issued an official apology on behalf of the Dutch cabinet to victims of violence in youth care. *Jeugdzorg Nederland* (the Dutch umbrella organization for youth care institutions) also offered an apology. In 2020, further apologies were issued by the ministers and *Jeugdzorg Nederland*. Separate apologies were also made by Sander Dekker to former residents of the Congregation of the Good Shepherd (*De Goede Herder*).

Measure 2: Financial support payment

The Temporary financial support payment scheme for victims of violence in youth care (*Tijdelijke regeling financiële tegemoetkoming voor slachtoffers van geweld in de jeugdzorg*) came into effect on 1 January 2021 and was administered by the *Schadefonds Geweldsmisdrijven*. Individuals who had resided in youth care between 1945 and 2019 under government involvement and had experienced violence were eligible to apply for a one-time sum of €5,000 until 31 December 2022.

Measure 3: Website and documentary ‘Blijvend Vertellen’

As a digital monument, a website and documentary titled ‘Blijvend Vertellen’ (in English: ‘Continuing to Tell’) were created, featuring various testimonies from those affected. The website and documentary were initially hosted by Victim Support Netherlands (*Slachtofferhulp Nederland*). Since then, the content has been integrated into the regular website of Victim Support Netherlands.

Measure 4: Central Information and Expertise Centre

The Central Information and Expertise Centre (*Centraal Informatie- en Expertisepunt; CIE*) was established to provide victims, their families, and professionals with information and referrals to appropriate care. The CIE included a website (www.geweldinjeugdzorginfo.nl), a helpline, and a chat service, operated by the Trimbos institute. Currently, only the website remains active.

Measure 5: Financial support for peer contact

Between 2021 and 2023, €150,000 was made available to support peer contact initiatives for the De Winter target group. Initially, a subsidy partnership was sought with *Het Koershuis*. When this proved unfeasible, the funds were reallocated to Victim Support Netherlands, where peer organizations could apply for funding to organize peer support activities.

Measure 6: Financial contribution to a monument

A foundation established by peers and peer representatives – the National Monument for Violence in Youth Care Foundation (*stichting Nationaal Monument Geweld in de Jeugdzorg; NMGJ*) – received funding to realize a physical monument. At the time of writing, the monument has not yet been installed.

Current study

The aim of this study is twofold: first, to evaluate the recognition measures implemented for victims of violence in youth care between 1945 and 2019; and second, to draw lessons from this evaluation for addressing the needs of others affected by government actions. Four main research questions guided the study:

1. **How did the process of developing the recognition measures unfold?**

2. **How were the recognition measures implemented and with what outcomes?**

3. **Did the recognition measures contribute to a sense of recognition and relief among affected people? If so, which (elements of) measures contributed positively/negatively?**

4. **What lessons can be drawn for future responses to victims of government actions?**

Chapter 3, 'Development of the recognition measures package,' addresses the first research question for the entire set of recognition measures. Chapters 4 through 10 address all four questions for each specific recognition measure separately. These chapters (Chapters 3–10) form Part I of the report.

In Part II of the report (Chapters 11–13), we develop a recognition framework and formulate overarching insights into recognition. Our findings show that understanding recognition exceeds the evaluation of individual measures. Part II addresses the fourth research question.

Theoretical framework

We use an interdisciplinary theoretical framework focused on transformative recognition, inspired by the work of political philosopher Nancy Fraser and others, and embedded in the broader UvH research project 'Dialogics of Justice'.¹ Affirmative recognition affirms existing relations, while transformative recognition empowers those affected to move beyond marginalization by reordering (power) relations. We combine transformative recognition with sociologist Hartmut Rosa's concept of resonance, leading us to conceptualize recognition as the visible transformation of social relationships.

1 For more information, see <https://dialogicsofjustice.org/>

Methods

Table 1 provides an overview of the different research methods used to answer each main research question. The perspectives of those affected and other stakeholders were central to our research approach.

Research question	Methods used
1. How did the process of developing the recognition measures unfold?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Interviews with project leaders; – Interviews with peer representatives (<i>lotgenotenvertegenwoordigers</i>); – Interviews with sector organizations; – Internal documents from the project teams JenV/VWS (e.g., final report, handover document); – Public documents from the national government and the House of Representatives.
2. How were the recognition measures implemented and with what outcomes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Interviews with implementing organizations; – Public and requested documents (e.g., memos, reports, communications) from implementing organizations (such as annual reports from the <i>Schadefonds Geweldsmisdrijven</i>); – Public documents from the government and the House of Representatives; – Media coverage and content from relevant organizations' websites.
3. Did the recognition measures contribute to a sense of recognition and relief among victims? If so, which (elements of) measures contributed positively/negatively?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Interviews with peer representatives; – Survey among applicants to the financial scheme (n = 623); – Focus groups with people affected by violence; – Feedback session with peer representatives.
4. What lessons can be drawn for future responses to victims of government actions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Synthesis of our own research findings from questions 1–3; – Academic literature on recognition and justice; – Connection to previous own research (especially the <i>Dialogics of Justice</i> project) and relevant studies on youth care and recognition by others (e.g., the De Winter report and the National Ombudsman's report <i>'Herstel bieden: Een vak apart'</i>).

Table 1: Overview of Research Methods per Research Question

Part I: Individual measures – Key findings

The government presented the recognition measures on 21 February 2020 as a coherent package. However, our research shows that awareness of the different measures varied significantly. Many respondents to our survey were, understandably, familiar with the financial support payment measure, as the survey was distributed exclusively among applicants to this scheme.

While about one-third of these respondents were also aware of the government's formal apologies, awareness of other measures – such as the *Blijvend Vertellen* documentary and website, the Central Information and Expertise Centre, the financial support for peer contact, and the physical monument – was much lower. These findings can be described as disappointing: recognition cannot exist without an audience.

What is invisible is difficult to value. When asked to what extent each measure contributed to recognition, respondents were generally lukewarm to (very) critical.

The financial support payment measure emerged as not only the best-known but also the most positively valued. Nevertheless, a large proportion of respondents indicated that they did not perceive the financial support payment measure as true recognition. Many respondents remarked that recognition measures – whether apologies or a monument – seem meaningless or insincere as long as violence in youth care continues today. The temporary nature of some measures, such as the deadline for applying to the financial scheme, was experienced as particularly painful.

Personal contact was also widely missed across several measures: a letter, a phone call, or even a brief physical meeting turn out to be extremely valuable. In addition, many respondents felt that the true perpetrators and responsible parties remained invisible.

Part II: Recognition framework – A layered understanding of recognition

Affected persons – like us researchers – also reflected more broadly on the question of what recognition entails. We combined their input with academic literature and insights from Part I of the report. This led us to develop a recognition framework. According to our framework, three guiding questions must be addressed for any recognition process:

What must be recognized?

Who must be recognized?

How should recognition be realized?

We answer each of these questions by distinguishing five dimensions. These dimensions broaden our understanding of recognition, showing that violence is not a single isolated event, that affected persons must be acknowledged in multiple capacities, and that recognition is a process with multiple (parallel) aims.

What must be recognized? The multi-layered character of the violence

In everyday language, 'recognition' often refers to the confirmation of something.

In our data collection, we observed that when affected persons spoke about recognition, they frequently returned to the violence they had experienced. This prompted us to ask: What exactly is the 'something' that must be recognized in this context? In response, we identified five dimensions of violence that call for recognition:

1 Act of Violence

Here we refer to affirming that certain 'events' have taken place, and subsequently labeling these acts of violence. Examples include the forms of violence that have been distinguished by the De Winter Committee: sexual violence, physical violence, psychological violence, forced labor.

2 Impact

This includes, among other things, long-term or delayed physical symptoms (e.g., pain during sex), mental or emotional distress (anxiety, depression, PTSD), social consequences (e.g., loneliness, distrust, conflict with one's own children), an inability to pursue education or employment due to these other complaints, and financial difficulties. It also includes more 'invisible' forms of suffering, such as missed opportunities. Impact is often relational: it does not exist solely within the individual, but unfolds in connection with the social environment. For example: someone is not simply unemployed, but is unable to find work because neither the employer nor society at large makes room for the impact – causing that impact to ripple outward.

3 Context

This refers to the context in which the direct violence occurred – often forming the undercurrent or breeding ground for the violent act. Examples include discriminatory policies; collective beliefs, such as the idea that children (especially in youth care) are not credible; bureaucratic obstacles that, for instance, prevent parents or others from accessing files; closed institutional cultures; lack of oversight, and so on.

4 Continuity

This refers to the idea that, from the perspective of those affected, the (direct) violence is still ongoing. For example: someone sees a news story about a new 'incident' in a youth care institution and relates it to their own experience of violence, leading them to conclude that the violence continues.

5 Response

This concerns negative or dismissive responses from the social and institutional environment to those affected and their experiences of violence. A common social response is disbelief. An example of an institutional response, specifically in the context of a recognition process: an authoritative institution designs a compensation procedure for those affected, but fails to involve them or relevant peer groups in the process – causing them to feel excluded; or it imposes a deadline or evidence requirement that is experienced as unfair.

Who must be recognized? The person affected as a multidimensional human being

In addition to the what, it also matters to whom a recognition measure is directed. Who is to be seen, heard, and believed? Here too, we distinguish **five dimensions of 'being affected,'** which largely correspond to the five dimensions of violence.

1 As a victim

Recognition of the person affected as a victim primarily means acknowledging them as the target of unlawful or unjust acts, and as innocent. Recognizing victimhood often also requires attention to the existence of perpetrators.

2 As a unique person

This dimension concerns individuality: the person affected as a unique individual, precisely because of their own particular combination of experiences, relationships, abilities, and needs. By 'unique person,' we do not mean an isolated or detached human being – individuals are always embedded in their social context and must be understood as such.

3 As a member of a marginalized group

Here, the person affected is recognized as a member of a group (or multiple groups) that occupy a disadvantaged or marginalized position within current social and institutional structures – a position that makes them more vulnerable to direct violence and its harmful consequences.

4 As a peer

People connect with the fate and suffering of others. We use the term peer (lotgenoot) here to refer to the person affected as someone who is connected to others who have experienced similar forms of violence. They may recognize themselves in the suffering of others, whether this suffering is present in reality or imagined in a possible future (for instance, concerning their own children).

5 As a knower and capable contributor ('kunner')

This refers to the person affected as a (potential) expert or bearer of knowledge. We can assume that their experiences have given them insight into their own situation, that they may possess knowledge about the nature of the violence itself (e.g., what it means to be abused), and possibly also know something about what is needed in response to such injustice.

Five layers of recognition

By combining the *what*, *who*, and *how* of recognition, we arrive at five layers of recognition:

Layer 1: **Recognition of the act of violence and victimhood through *naming***

Layer 2: **Recognition of the impact on the unique person through *seeing and supporting***

Layer 3: **Recognition of the marginalizing context for the group through *taking responsibility***

Layer 4: **Recognition of the continuity of violence for the peer through *reforming***

Layer 5: **Recognition of the contribution to the response as knower and capable contributor through *including***

Table 2 provides an overview of how recognition can take shape in order to acknowledge both the layered nature of the violence and the person affected as a multidimensional human being.

What	Who	How
<i>The layered nature of the violence</i>	<i>The person affected as a multidimensional human being</i>	<i>Recognition as a relational process</i>
Act of violence	Victim	Naming (the violence and victimhood) Naming the violence and those affected; truth-finding (investigation) and public disclosure of facts; acknowledging or assigning responsibility/blame; prosecuting
Impact	Unique person	Seeing and supporting Providing space to hear and see individual stories; countering stigmatization. Additionally, offering (financial) support and tailored care.
Context	Member of marginalized group	Taking responsibility Investigating and acknowledging the structural causes of violence, both for the general population and specific target groups. Identifying related (institutional) responsibility and responsible parties.
Continuity	Peer	Reforming Addressing structural causes of violence to prevent recurrence in the present and future. Naming and acknowledging continuities and repeated failures. Includes guarantees of non-repetition.
Response	Knower and capable contributor	Including Involving and compensating those affected in the recognition process. This begins with believing and acknowledging their lived experience of violence. Also includes recognizing and valuing their expertise in making the violence visible and understood, and sharing this knowledge and these stories with society.

Table 2: Overview of the what, who, and how of recognition

The five layers of recognition illustrate that recognition is a relational concept.

With each successive layer, more relationships come into view – besides the ‘victim,’ also the family, the institution, wider structures, and society. With each layer, we move from affirmative recognition to transformative recognition. The figure below illustrates this progression. Affirmative recognition, which acknowledges the violence but confirms existing power relations, can exist within the first layers. But transformative recognition requires all five layers – especially the ‘outer’ ones – in which power relations are restructured and the person affected can move out of a marginalized position.

The movement from affirmative to transformative recognition

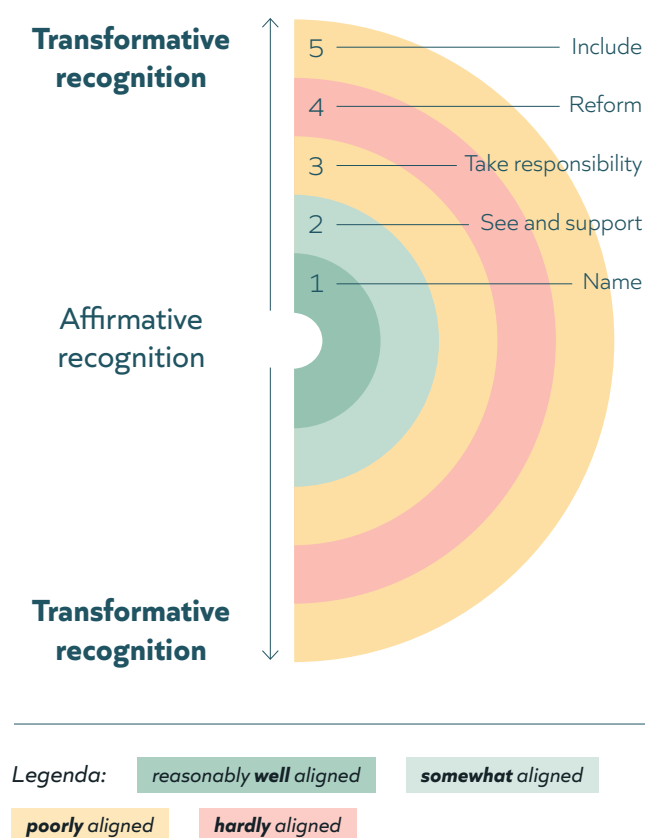


Figure 1

Part 2: Recognition framework – Interpretation

We analyzed the overall recognition measures package using the recognition framework outlined above. This analysis showed that the package, as implemented and experienced, aligned with the five layers of recognition to varying degrees:

- **It aligned reasonably well** with the first layer: recognition of acts of violence and victimhood through naming.
- **It somewhat aligned** with the second layer: recognition of the impact on unique individuals through seeing and supporting.
- **It poorly aligned** with the third and fifth layers: recognition of the marginalizing context by taking responsibility, and recognition of the contribution of affected persons as knowers and capable contributors through including.
- **It hardly aligned** with the fourth layer: recognition of the continuity of violence by reforming institutions and systems.

Especially the later or outer layers of recognition turn out to be the least well addressed by the recognition package. The experienced continuity of violence in youth care poses the greatest obstacle to transformative recognition. Many of those affected state that there can be no real recognition as long as violence in youth care continues. Above all, our research shows that people expect recognition to bring about change – not only on a personal level, but also at the institutional and societal levels. Yet the focus of the recognition measures lay heavily on the (individual) person affected. Where – apart from the formal apologies – were the faces and words of those responsible? This absence too stands in the way of transforming social relationships. For those affected, recognition also means addressing perpetration and institutional responsibility.

This report concludes that according to many affected persons, transformative recognition and resonance have not been achieved. For many, nothing – or too little – seems to have changed: the various parties involved have not been moved, social relationships have not become more equal or more just. This is not to say that the recognition measures achieved nothing – there certainly was affirmative recognition – but what was achieved cannot be considered transformative recognition.

That is regrettable, precisely because there were also many people who did experience the measures positively. The challenge now lies in translating these individual positive experiences into broader, structural, and enduring recognition – recognition that can indeed be transformative. This is a task for society as a whole, and for all involved policymakers, politicians, and care professionals.

Insights and lessons for future recognition processes

Based on the recognition framework, we formulated fifteen insights and lessons that may support the design and evaluation of other (future) recognition processes following historical, systemic, and/or institutional injustice:

First layer: **Recognition of the act of violence and victimhood through naming**

1. Address the person affected not just individually, but also in relation to responsibility and perpetration.
2. Involve society in spreading the facts and accounts of what happened (for example, through broader coverage via news channels and social media).

Second layer: **Recognition of the impact on the unique person through seeing and supporting**

3. Make personal contact a priority, including contact between those affected and those responsible.
4. Make the impact of the violence visible and address it where possible (for example, by also recognizing family members as affected).
5. Ensure the availability of support tailored to the specific needs of those affected.
6. Ensure organizational, emotional, and psychological support when working with vulnerable groups, and guard against (re)stigmatization.

Third layer: **Recognition of the marginalizing context for the group through taking responsibility**

7. Design recognition measures based on a specific understanding of the type of marginalization and responsibility involved (for example, by ensuring that individual institutions also make formal apologies where appropriate).
8. Safeguard coherence between different recognition measures.

Fourth layer: **Recognition of the continuity of violence for peers through reforming**

9. Offer recognition measures in a structural, long-term, or even continuous manner.
10. Communicate clearly, consistently, and transparently how recognition measures relate to efforts to prevent future violence.

Fifth layer: **Recognition of the contribution to the response as knower and capable contributor through including**

11. Base the measure on trust in the lived experiences of those affected.
12. Integrate (equal) participation of those affected at all stages of the process.
13. Ensure clarity of roles during the development process, and provide support for navigating and addressing conflict.
14. Translate the knowledge and expertise of those affected into relevant policy, practice, and education.
15. Prioritize reach, and make the broader aims of the recognition package tangible and experienceable.

Conclusion

The knowledge and expertise of those involved, and especially of those affected, often formulated with great clarity, were our most important teachers throughout this research. Recognition is undoubtedly a complex process, but at the same time, there already exists a great deal of expertise on what is needed, particularly among those affected and other stakeholders. But that knowledge must be included and genuinely heard. Fortunately, this did happen to a large extent during the development of the recognition package. The peer representatives we interviewed still look back predominantly positively on the way the project teams involved them. At the same time, they noted a lack of involvement in – and transparency about – the decision-making processes surrounding the final measures. What this study shows is that inclusion of those affected is meaningful, but should be embedded throughout the entire process.

The knowledge and perspectives of those affected were rich and diverse. Yet there was also a strong common thread: a deep sense of solidarity with young people in youth care today and in the future. While division can arise when something (such as money) is to be distributed, we primarily observed mutual solidarity in conversations about building a better future. This future holds the potential for transformation. We therefore present this report – an evaluation of past recognition measures – primarily as a call for reform in the present. If the government and other responsible actors actively and visibly combat violence, that would constitute true recognition.

We would like to sincerely thank everyone who spoke with us – often more than once. Our special appreciation goes to the peers and peer representatives who repeatedly had to redirect us toward the issues that truly matter – to them.

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