Summary

Juvenile sex offenders are often considered as tomorrow’s adult sex offenders. This assumption, the ‘specialist view’ underlies strict criminal justice policies and warrant the use of special explanatory models, assessment tools and treatment approaches. Recently, an increasing number of empirical studies challenged this view for juvenile sex offenders, by presenting evidence for a more ‘generalist view’ (e.g., Van den Berg et al., 2011; Lussier et al., 2012; Lussier & Blokland, 2014; Nisbet et al., 2004; Zimring et al., 2007, 2009). These studies found that relatively few juvenile sex offenders re-offend sexually in adulthood. This could indicate that sexual offending is a manifestation of antisocial tendencies, that is of a more ‘passing phase’, and part of the general criminal career.

In this dissertation I have investigated the specialist as well as generalist view on juvenile sexual offending by exploring the criminal career development from adolescence into adulthood for a sample of 498 juvenile sex offenders in the Netherlands.

First, sexual criminal career patterns were studied, with particular emphasis on whether juvenile sex offenders specialize in sexual offending over time. The findings in this study show that juvenile sex offenders are overall not the persistent specialist offenders. With the exception of a small group (n = 27) whom continue sexual offending in adulthood, these individuals are probably plagued by inadequate social skills and specific psychopathological problems, like paraphilia.

Second, general criminal career patterns were studied. Overall recidivism rates were high, yet comparable to other populations of (high-risk) offenders. To get a better understanding of the general criminal career of juvenile sex offenders and their development over time, assumptions from developmental and life-course criminology were compared to the five statistically identified criminal careers for the current sample of juvenile sex offenders. These theories were found to be partly applicable to understand-
ing criminal development of juvenile sex offenders. In line with Moffitt’s (1993) dual taxonomy we found a normative criminal career pattern for most of the juvenile sex offenders, with a peak in offending during adolescence and a steady decline thereafter. No life-course-persistent criminal career was found, this is contrary to Moffitt’s assumption that those who commit a sexual offense are likely to be life-course-persistent offenders.

Third, it was investigated if the life-events of marriage, parenthood and employment were could explain the development of the criminal career of juvenile sex offenders. In line with (Sampson & Laub, 2005), juvenile sex offenders were found to benefit most from employment, as employment was associated with an overall decrease in offending. Moreover, the effect of employment on offending increased with age. A reciprocal effect of offending on employment was also found; offending reduced chances of future employment.

Fourth, within the existing literature it is well established that juvenile sex offenders are a heterogeneous offender group. First, statistical analysis categorized the sample with regard to their offending patterns into five different offender trajectories. However, these offender trajectories differed only marginally with regard to stable risk and protective characteristics. Therefore, this study further applied a typology based on offense characteristics, resulting in three subtypes: child abusers, peer abusers and group offenders (Hendriks, 2006). These subtypes were found to differ significantly on risk and protective characteristics. With regard to employment we found child abusers to differ significantly from the other two subtypes, as no reducing effect of employment on offending was found for child abusers. Moreover, child abusers also committed significantly fewer offenses that the other two subtypes. To conclude, this dissertation showed that, overall, juvenile sex offenders are not the persistent and specialized offenders, the specialist view assumes them to be. Juvenile sex offenders appear to be more generalists in their offending patterns.

This dissertation is scientifically relevant as it used a prospectively gathered, rich dataset consisting of long-term objective and detailed information on offending and life-events. Moreover, advanced statistical methods were used to achieve the aims of this dissertation. This dissertation also holds important practical implications. It was demonstrated that specialization in sexual offending occurred only for a small group of juvenile sex offenders. Thus, the treatment of sex offenders must be aimed at this
small subgroup, and their specific risk factors. The protective effect of employment on offending yields important implications for policy. In the Netherlands, current criminal justice policies exclude (juvenile) sex offenders from specific types of employment. Given that the current study found a positive effect of employment, such labor market restrictions warrant reconsideration. Guidance towards employment may be more effective in risk reduction for juvenile sex offenders in young adulthood.