Early Findings from the Prolific and Other Priority Offenders Evaluation
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Early Findings from the Prolific and Other Priority Offenders Evaluation

Paul Dawson

Summary

Research indicates that a small number of offenders is responsible for a disproportionately large amount of crime. The Prolific and other Priority Offenders (PPO) programme, which was implemented nationally on 6 September 2004, directs resources to this group of offenders. This DPR informs practitioners and other interested parties of the early findings from the national PPO evaluation.

Offenders on PPO schemes
- PPOs started offending earlier and were more criminally versatile than a general sample of offenders. They also had more convictions in the previous five years. This indicates that in general the right people have been identified for the scheme.

Selection and de-selection
- In general, schemes adopted a two-stage procedure to select PPOs: identification of potential PPOs, followed by the application of a selection matrix. Criteria used in the matrix varied between schemes according to local priorities.
- A wide range of de-selection criteria were used to withdraw PPO status from offenders. Staff in PPO schemes gave less consideration to de-selection compared with the selection process and expressed concerns over the consequences of de-selection.

Interventions
- Staff on the schemes reported that PPOs received a more intensive package of interventions than non-PPO offenders. This may be viewed as evidence of the premium service that the guidance encourages Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) and Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) to develop.
- Less than a third of CDRPs implementing the scheme had dedicated PPO staff. Approximately half of schemes had co-located staff.
- There was a degree of mismatch between PPO offending-related problems and the involvement in the schemes of appropriate agencies that can address such needs.
- Overall, staff interviewed were positive about the PPO programme, particularly the benefits of increased partnership working and data sharing.
- Data sharing was judged by practitioners to be a crucial aspect of the PPO programme. Ensuring that all relevant agencies share data appropriately is seen as a priority for an effective PPO scheme.

Indications of impact
- There are some promising early results. In their first six months on the scheme there was a ten per cent reduction in recorded convictions for the first PPO cohort compared to the six months prior to the start.
- However, further work is required to disentangle the effects of the PPO programme from other factors (such as changes in the overall levels of crime and offenders brought to justice). This follow-up work is currently being undertaken and results will be published in due course.
Introduction

It is estimated that approximately 100,000 (10% of all active offenders) are responsible for half of all crime (Home Office, 2001). Such offenders are an important issue for the government in terms of reducing crime (Home Office, 2002a) and the public concern about crime. This group of offenders have been previously targeted by Persistent Offender schemes. Research on the effectiveness of these schemes in reducing offending was mixed (Chenery and Pease, 2000; Chenery and Deakin, 2003; Gendreau, Goggin, and Fulton, 2001).

The Prolific and other Priority Offenders (PPO) programme was announced by the Prime Minister in March 2004. The programme was implemented nationally on 6 September 2004. The PPO programme allowed local areas to identify and select offenders who are considered to be the most prolific, the most persistently anti-social and those who pose the greatest threat to their community. Under the programme, CDRPs or CSPs identified PPOs and co-ordinated a local set of programmes, procedures and protocols to implement the scheme (Home Office 2004a, Home Office 2004b). A PPO label is not legally recognised and any individual deemed suitable may be placed on the scheme, regardless of the stage they may have reached in the criminal justice system.

There are three complementary strands to the PPO programme.

1. Prevent and Deter (P&D). Aiming to stop young people from engaging in offending behaviours and graduating to become the prolific offenders of the future.
2. Catch and Convict (C&C). Aiming to prevent PPOs from offending through apprehension and conviction, and through licence enforcement, by ensuring a swift return to the courts for those PPOs continuing to offend.
3. Rehabilitate and Resettle (R&R). Aiming to rehabilitate PPOs who are in custody or serving sentences in the community, through closer working between all relevant agencies and continued post-sentence support.

The PPO evaluation aims to examine the Catch and Convict and Rehabilitate and Resettle strands of the programme. Specifically, the research had four key objectives:

1. identify which offenders have been selected as PPOs;
2. explore how schemes have been implemented;
3. identify what interventions PPOs receive; and
4. explore the effect the PPO programme may have on offending.

This report is based upon work conducted between March and July 2005.

Who are the PPOs?

A detailed examination of the first PPOs (n=7,801) allocated to the schemes (September and October 2004) revealed that they were predominantly young (the average age at the point of identification as a PPO was 25, the most common age was 20), male (95%) and white (88%). The age range was 10–88 though the vast majority were in the age range 17-40 with, for example, just 16% outside of this range. The PPO cohort, aside from a number of characteristics which will be subsequently discussed, seemed to be generally similar to other offenders.

Offending behaviour of PPOs

In order to see whether there were any differences between the PPO cohort and the ‘general’ offending population, a snapshot of offenders was drawn from the Offenders Index (OI).

The PPO cohort had an average 47 convictions in their career as compared to 72 for the Offender Index group. However, over the previous five years the PPO cohort had received on average 24 convictions, compared to ten convictions for the OI group. Interestingly, a number of PPOs did not have an extensive history of recorded convictions over their total criminal career. A total of 0.5 per cent (n=36) had no previous convictions and ten per cent (n=786) had nine or fewer recorded convictions.

The PPO cohort were predominantly acquisitive offenders - 37 per cent had such a conviction in their history. Other offence convictions included criminal damage (3%), drug offences (4%), violent offences (4%), other summary offences (17%) and other motoring offences (18%).
While over a third of offenders had convictions for acquisitive crimes, it also emerged that over their total criminal careers the PPO cohort was more criminally versatile than the OI group. Criminal versatility is defined as the number of different offence types for which the offender has convictions. The Police National Computer (PNC) has 12 main offence types (see Figure 1 for a full breakdown of PPO criminal versatility). OI offenders are most likely to have committed offences in only one offence type; PPOs are most likely to have committed offences in seven offence types.

Figure 1: Criminal versatility of PPOs

A further interesting feature of PPO offending is that, on average, convictions began significantly younger as compared to the OI offenders (average 15 versus average 21). This is consistent with criminal careers research generally which suggests that early onset of offending leads to a more prolific and persistent criminal career (Farrington, 2005).

Factors linked to offending

Table 1 provides the breakdown of factors linked to offending, as identified by the Offender Assessment System (OASys). OASys was developed by the Home Office (Home Office, 2002b) and is a tool to measure the risks, needs and likelihood of reconviction for offenders. Education, training and employability were the most common needs, identified in 82 per cent of PPOs. The PPO cohort presented higher levels of most criminogenic needs than the OASys group and were on average rated as high-risk offenders (as defined by an OASys score of 100 or more) whereas the OI group were rated as medium-risk offenders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors linked to offending</th>
<th>PPO cohort %</th>
<th>OASys sample %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education, training and employability problems</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking and behaviour</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal lifestyle and associates</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug misuse</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation problems</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship problems</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance problems (i.e. inability to manage money)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional well-being</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol abuse</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-criminal attitudes</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scheme implementation

Set-up of the schemes

Although practitioners were enthusiastic about the programme, and identified benefits once schemes were up and running, the main challenge identified was the lack of specific additional funding and resources. PPO staff spoke of the disadvantages of managing or running a scheme with no extra resources and contended that with extra resources PPO work could improve. Some sites were able to overcome this issue by locating the PPO team within an existing crime reduction programme, or by successfully acquiring extra staff and financial resources. The Drugs Intervention Programme funded some areas to support the effective working relationship between PPO schemes and Criminal Justice Integrated Teams (CJIT) dealing with drug-using PPOs.

Other common challenges identified by practitioners when implementing the programme were:
- the short time span provided by the Home Office to implement the PPO programme;
- a lack of clear understanding of the relationship between the C&C and the R&R strands of the programme;
- uncertainty as to how to bring together the different agencies;
- difficulties in ensuring ownership of the programme; and
- involvement of the courts in the PPO scheme.

Selection of PPOs

Most PPOs were selected through a two-stage procedure. First, areas generate a list of potential PPOs. This list may have been drawn from police intelligence, other agencies’ knowledge, from Persistent Offender schemes, and from local needs (i.e. local crime targets). Second, a set of criteria, presented in a matrix would be applied to this group to identify the PPOs.

No standard selection criteria for PPOs were identified. A wide range of factors was used in the selection matrices. Criteria included (in order of number of responses):
- criminal history;
- the type of offence;
- police intelligence;
- drug use (history and current use);
- National Intelligence Model (NIM);
- probation intelligence; and
- CDRP priorities.

These selection criteria mean PPOs with diverse characteristics can be identified. An important aspect of the PPO scheme is the ability to identify the offenders who are creating the most problems for a locality. A selection matrix that is systematic, consistent and accountable, while also flexible for the needs of an area, is crucial in implementing a scheme.

Key consideration

The selection of PPOs needs to be systematic, consistent and accountable in order to ensure that the most troublesome offenders are identified and put on the scheme.

De-selection, the withdrawal of PPO status from an offender, received less attention than the selection criteria. Common issues involved in the de-selection of PPOs included (in order of number of responses):
- offender relocation;
- a decrease/cessation in offending;
- criminal intelligence indicating non-offending; and
- imposition of lengthy custodial sentences.

Practitioners were uncertain as to how long an individual should remain a PPO. There was some concern that if PPO support was withdrawn the offender may return to prolific criminality. With fixed resources, emergent prolific offenders can be included only as others have PPO status withdrawn. Figures from the Home Office demonstrate the PPO population has remained stable at the 10,000 mark for a number of months (Home Office, 2005).
**Key consideration**

De-selection needs to be an integral part of the process to ensure that the resources are targeted on those who create the most problems.

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**Interventions the PPOs received and the key agencies involved in PPO work**

The survey of CDRPs and area interviews reported that PPOs received an enhanced package of interventions when compared to non-PPO offenders.

Catch and Convict tactics included (in order of number of responses):
- dedicated tracking of PPOs;
- notifying custody officers;
- increased surveillance of the target;
- increased use of police intelligence to monitor the offender;
- a fast tracking to the CJS;
- home visits; and
- a greater use of letters to communicate with PPOs.

Rehabilitate and Resettle tactics included (in order of number of responses):
- prison visits;
- home visits;
- increased meetings with probation case worker;
- fast tracking PPOs into interventions;
- increased tracking through interventions; and
- ensuring the PPO attends interventions.

Table 2 highlights the agencies involved in the PPO work. Encouragingly, most of the key agencies, such as the police, probation, Youth Offending Team (YOT) and so on are consistently involved or involved when required.

**Table 2: Agencies involved in PPO work**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Consistently N</th>
<th>Consistently %</th>
<th>When required N</th>
<th>When required %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probation</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YOT</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIP/DAT</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Authority</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCJB</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPS</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A welcome finding is that the police, probation and youth offending teams are very strongly engaged with the programme. Conversely, accommodation (13%), employment (9%) and education agencies (5%) seem to be largely absent from PPO work. This is a key issue, particularly given the OASys data (see above) that demonstrated education, training and employability problems (present in 82% of PPOs) and accommodation problems (present in 52% of PPOs) were important needs for the PPO cohort.

**Key consideration**

There was a mismatch between PPO offending-related problems and the involvement in the schemes of appropriate agencies that can address such needs.
Generally, the PPO work was conducted by dedicated staff. Dedicated staffing ranged from one member to entire PPO teams. Importantly, 29 per cent of all schemes had no dedicated staff to implement the PPO scheme. Only half the schemes reported that they had colocated staff (122 schemes, 52%). Dedicated staff and colocation were viewed by the staff as valuable instruments in delivering the PPO scheme.

**Innovative practices**

A range of innovative practices to enhance the implementation of the programme were identified by PPO staff. These practices are innovative because they were identified by staff as ways to improve delivery of the PPO scheme and were not outlined in the guidance. These included:

- leaflets and other information to disseminate to agencies about the PPO scheme;
- information sheets for offenders to explain the scheme;
- workshops on running the PPO scheme; and
- a colour-coded filing system to allow easier tracking of PPOs.

**Data sharing**

According to staff working in the schemes, the PPO programme had considerably improved inter-agency partnership and data sharing. Improved liaison between police, probation and other agencies was viewed as crucial to the effective delivery of the PPO programme. Increased data sharing allowed staff to have a more comprehensive view of the offender.

Data sharing was not without its challenges. A number of schemes reported that they were not being notified of PPO prison releases within the 28-day guideline. This caused problems in running the PPO scheme, hampering practical work with PPOs.

Some staff described difficulties regarding data sharing with drug agencies, particularly in accessing information often regarded as confidential health data.

**Example from a case study site**

A PPO scheme in the north west of England reported:

“...we were identifying offenders who had drug-related problems, and we were physically taking them to the Drug Service ... and when we then made contact, just for an update, the Drug Service said, no, we can’t tell you.” (Police representative)

This scheme was able to address this challenge by devising a letter which their PPO signed giving informed consent for the treatment provider to share relevant information.

**Key consideration**

Data sharing was judged by practitioners to be a crucial aspect of the PPO programme. Ensuring that all relevant agencies share data appropriately should be a priority for every PPO scheme.

**Benefits of the scheme**

Staff were largely positive about the PPO programme. Particular aspects that received positive feedback were:

- increased data sharing;
- providing a valuable method of working with the most needy offenders;
- increased use of police and probation intelligence; and
- the more positive and proactive approach towards offenders.

Interestingly, staff described a number of unexpected benefits of working on the PPO programme. These included staff development, job satisfaction and the improved communication between agencies for non-PPO offenders.
Effect of the scheme on recorded convictions

The Police National Computer (PNC) provides data on all recorded convictions, reprimands, cautions and warnings. These data were collected for the PPO cohort over their total criminal career. Subsequent analysis utilises only recorded convictions.

In the six months leading up to the PPO start the cohort was responsible for 22,484 recorded convictions compared to 20,188 recorded convictions in the first six months on the scheme. This is a drop of ten per cent in recorded convictions. Figure 2 presents the crime rate of the PPO cohort in the two years leading up to and the first seven months of the PPO scheme.

![Figure 2: The PPO cohort conviction count two years prior to and seven months after the inception of the PPO scheme.](image)

The PPO programme, so far, seems to be associated with a drop in recorded offending reflected in convictions. When interpreting the results, the short time frame of the follow-up period, national trends in crime, potential changes in charging and sentencing over this time period and the lack of a comparison group should all be considered. This is a promising result for the programme, but one that needs further research before confidence can be placed in it.

Discussion

This report has presented interim findings from the PPO evaluation. Much more work is planned before the final report is due in September 2006. This work will include following the first cohort of PPOs for longer, obtaining a comparison group to allow more robust analysis, examining if certain schemes have more impact than others and if so why, and offender interviews.

A number of issues have been raised, such as the importance of data sharing and partnership work, identifying and incorporating the appropriate agencies to address PPO needs, the wide range of selection criteria and concerns with deselection. These issues should be addressed by PPO staff with the aim of improving the delivery of the PPO programme.

It is worth noting that regarding impact, the research has only been able to follow the PPO cohort for seven months. A much longer follow-up period is required (at least two years) in order to demonstrate that any changes in offending are linked to the PPO programme.

The PPO evaluation team are interested in developing networks with regional researchers or practitioners who are in the process of developing or evaluating their PPO schemes.
Method

Cohort of PPOs

All offenders identified on the J Track database as PPOs in September and October 2004 (n=7,801) were used to generate the cohort. A database was generated combining PNC and OASys data. PNC data were collected in June 2005 for 7,573 (97%) of the PPO cohort. OASys data were collected in July 2005 for 45 per cent of the PPO cohort.

Comparative work

Two comparison groups were drawn:

- The Offenders Index holds data on court appearances. A snapshot was taken from the OI of all offenders who received a court disposal during one of four one-week time periods during 2003 (the most recent complete year). This was to allow comparison of PPO criminal activity with ‘normal’ offenders.
- Secondly, a large group (n=32,984) of OASys assessments from the first quarter of 2005 was collected to generate a “regular” OASys profile.

Survey of CDRPs/CSPs

A survey of all 259 CDRPs and CSPs was conducted. A 92 per cent response rate was achieved (237/259). The survey examined issues such as selection, de-selection, staffing and the agencies involved in the PPO work.

Case study work

One CDRP or CSP was selected from each of the ten regions in England and Wales. The ten were selected in order to present a good mix of urban and rural areas and with or without previous experience of Persistent Offender schemes. In total, 52 PPO staff were interviewed with approximately five staff per area being interviewed.

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References


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Further information is available on the internet at:
<http://www.crimereduction.gov.uk/ppominisite01.htm> (Last accessed on 18-10-05)
<http://www.drugs.gov.uk> (Last accessed on 18-10-05)