
THE NATIONAL EVALUATION OF *ON TRACK*, PHASE TWO

**INTERIM FINDINGS FROM THE FIRST WAVE OF THE
LONGITUDINAL COHORT STUDY**

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Introduction

This Research Briefing summarises *interim* findings from the first wave of a longitudinal study of parents and children, undertaken as part of the National Evaluation of *On Track*, Phase Two (March 2003 to April 2006). *On Track* is a long-term multi-component initiative aimed at children and the families of children aged four to twelve who may be at risk of offending and antisocial behaviour. It is part of the £960m Children's Fund programme. At the start of the study, in 2004, *On Track* was operational in twenty four¹ areas of particularly high crime and high deprivation in England and Wales. The study was conducted by the National Centre for Social Research in consortium with the Policy Research Bureau on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

Aims of the research

The main aims of the overall study were to explore:

- the characteristics of children and families in *On Track* areas and, in particular, those that use *On Track* services;
- their level of risk in terms of the factors associated with later offending and the protective factors that ameliorate risk;
- the views, attitudes and experiences of those taking up *On Track* services;
- the short and medium term impacts of using *On Track* on children, young people and their families.

This interim report covers the baseline findings with regard to the characteristics, attitudes and experiences of *On Track* residents and service users at the time of the first interview. Analysis of the possible impact of *On Track* will be covered by the second report, which will draw from both waves of the study.

¹ However, in 2004 *On Track* ceased to exist as a discrete programme in one area and its remaining services were delivered as Children's Fund services.

The demographics of children and families in On Track areas

What were the demographic features of families in On Track areas?

The **On Track Area sample** was a representative sample of families living in the 24 pilot On Track areas, who would have been eligible for On Track services (there was a child aged 5-13 in the household). Because the pilot areas were deliberately chosen to cover areas with more need for such services, households in these areas were distinctive in several ways.

Although most children lived with both natural parents (59%), living with a lone parent or in a step-/reconstituted family was also common (40%). Around a third (34%) lived in lone-parent families, higher than figures suggested by the Census.

The proportion of ethnic minorities in On Track areas was generally higher than in the population as a whole, with around a quarter belonging to a minority ethnic group (most commonly of Asian origin).

Children lived in relatively deprived families, with more household heads in manual occupations or never having worked, more households renting and on lower income than households in general.

Were On Track users different to all households in the On Track areas?

The **On Track User sample** was a subgroup of the On Track Area sample, consisting of those households who had identified themselves as using On Track services in the previous year. Compared to non-users, more of these children were younger (aged 5-7) or boys, possibly indicating higher usage of On Track services amongst these groups. Otherwise, On Track users did not seem to differ from households in the On Track area as a whole, in terms of their demographics.

How did the Booster sample compare with the main sample of On Track users?

The **Booster sample** was a supplementary sample of On Track service users of particular kinds of targeted services that had more intense methods of working (e.g. family therapy) and lower user numbers. The sample was identified via On Track project records. Differences between the Booster sample

and the other samples could not be tested for statistical significance, but some contrasts with the On Track User sample are worth noting:

- there was a particularly high proportion of boys (62% compared to 58% of On Track users in the main sample);
- their ethnic profile was somewhat different, with fewer Asian origin children and proportionately more Black children;
- half of the Booster sample families were lone parent families, a higher proportion than the level amongst On Track users;
- the Booster sample appeared to be less affluent than On Track users, with fewer heads of household in work, lower household incomes and fewer owner-occupiers.

Risk and protective factors in On Track areas

The survey asked about a wide range of factors that may be associated with an increased or decreased likelihood of later offending: that is risk factors as well as protective factors.

What were the levels of risk and protective factors in On Track areas?

Parents living in On Track areas reported a range of difficulties in their personal and living circumstances. Comparative evidence pointed towards:

- higher numbers of problems in the family, particularly to do with money, adult relationships, accommodation and children;
- parents' higher than average levels of mental and emotional difficulties;
- above average incidence of behavioural, emotional or relationship difficulties shown by their children, as well as a higher incidence of longstanding illness;
- on a limited comparison, similar levels of anti-social behaviour to the national average, although interviews with children did reveal some problematic attitudes and behaviour in the field of anti-social behaviour.

Were On Track users different to all households in the On Track areas?

On Track users did show greater need than non-users on a number of indicators.

Parents who used On Track services reported a higher incidence of current problems in their lives, while children in such families tended to have greater behavioural, emotional or relationship difficulties.

Children in families who used On Track services were also more likely:

- to have been excluded from school;
- to be assessed as performing 'below average' at school by their parents;
- for their parents to have had discussions about them with school staff because of problems such as behaviour, schoolwork or attendance.

However, there were a number of indicators where there did not appear to be much difference between On Track service users and non-users, including:

- specific factors to do with the parents, including their physical and mental health, and levels of anti-social behaviour;
- aspects of parenting including measures of warmth and hostility, levels of monitoring and supervision and degree of shared family activities;
- self-reported truancy by the child, and special educational needs.

How did the Booster sample compare with the main sample of On Track users?

The Booster sample tended to cover users of more intensive interventions, so - as expected - they did display a greater level of need on some indicators.

The proportion of the sample citing emotional and behavioural problems with children was higher, as were children's levels of limiting health conditions, isolation from their peers, special educational needs and exclusions. Self-reported anti-social behaviour was also higher for secondary school age children in the Booster sample. Booster sample parents seemed to be less involved in their children's education.

Service use by children and families

How accurate is the survey measurement of service use?

There may be some under-reporting of services in the survey, as it was difficult for respondents to name all the services they used. While this under-reporting is not high enough to invalidate the results,

measurement error should be borne in mind when looking at findings on service use.

What was the level of service use?

Forty-three per cent of families in On Track areas named at least one kind of service that they had used in the past year.

Thirteen per cent of parents in On Track areas reported that they or their child had used an On Track service in the past year, that is just under one-in-three of those who had used any service. This was lower than expected on the basis of (limited) previous information, even accounting for under-reporting in the current study.

Most families who accessed On Track (or non-On Track) services only reported using one service in the last year.

What types of services were used?

Services were classified into five broad categories: school-based, pre-school, family and parenting support, psychologist or psychiatric or therapeutic, and youth services. The most common type of service - whether On Track or not - was school-based services. Nearly half (46%) of all services used in the On Track areas were school-based.

However, On Track services had a rather distinctive profile, with far more services school-based (62%) or dealing with family and parenting support (17%) compared to 10% of all services in On Track areas). Most parents who used On Track services (54%) got involved as a result of a referral from a professional or other agency, which was not significantly different from non-On Track services.

Who used On Track services?

Several characteristics were found to be associated with use of On Track services:

- service use was higher the younger the child, and for boys;
- families that had English (or Welsh) as their main or sole language were more likely to use On Track services - and services overall - than families that spoke other languages;
- use of On Track services was higher among parents who reported more problems in the

family, or whose children had high levels of emotional or behavioural difficulties.

How did parents and children rate On Track services?

Parents and children generally had very positive views about On Track services that they had used. Staff and factors such as the location or times of the service were all highly rated.

Most On Track services were perceived to be helpful to parents and particularly to children. Positive impacts, particularly on children, were reported in general terms although many users could not identify specific changes in behaviour or circumstances as a result of service use.

These positive views about On Track services or services in On Track areas were similar to those held by service users in the comparison group in Matched areas, although Matched area services were sometimes rated more favourably.

Overall conclusions

What does Wave One tell us so far?

The main themes arising from the Wave One data are:

- wave One confirms the picture of On Track areas as those featuring greater deprivation and need than areas in general;
- On Track services are reaching some of the more needy families.
- use of On Track services is lower than anticipated, as measured by the study;
- On Track services form a distinctive set of services, compared to those generally available.
- On Track services are positively viewed by parents and children, although this is also true for services in general;
- the Booster sample helps us look at the experiences of those On Track users with particularly high levels of problems and difficulties.

Looking ahead to Wave Two

The Wave Two report will cover the second wave of interviews, and look at how the samples have changed between the two interviews. Some limitations do

apply to the analysis that can be done, in particular:

- the size of impact that can be detected as statistically significant;
- the need to look at On Track services as a package of interventions, rather than at individual types;
- the coverage of short-term effects only, specifically those observable over the two-year period of fieldwork.

The Wave Two data will allow us to look at:

- trends in overall and On Track service usage in On Track areas;
- whether On Track and Matched areas have changed in the same way since the Wave One (subject to the limitations mentioned above);
- the direct impact on On Track users, although this will be limited due to the small number of respondents who identified themselves as On Track users.

Methodology of the survey

In On Track areas, 780 computer assisted face-to-face interviews were conducted with parents and 541 interviews with children aged between seven and thirteen; similar numbers of interviews were conducted in Matched areas. A separate Booster sample of families that had used On Track services was identified through On Track projects and 306 parent interviews and 165 child interviews were taken. Fieldwork for Wave One was conducted in the summer of 2004 and the Wave Two survey was carried out in 2005.

Additional information

The interim report on the First Wave of the Longitudinal Cohort Study is available on the website for the National Evaluation of On Track Phase Two, at www.prb.org.uk. It can also be accessed via the DfES *Every Child Matters* website, at www.everychildmatters.gov.uk.

Copies of this Research Brief are available free of charge from DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

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