
THE NATIONAL EVALUATION OF *ON TRACK*, PHASE TWO YOUNG PEOPLE, RISK AND PROTECTION: A MAJOR SURVEY OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN ON TRACK AREAS

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Introduction

This Research Briefing summarises the key findings from a survey of primary schools, a study that formed 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 time 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 survey was carried out by the independent Policy Research Bureau on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). A companion Research Briefing on a parallel survey of secondary schools in *On Track* areas is also available.

Aims of the research

The aim of the primary schools survey was not to evaluate the specific impacts of *On Track*. Rather, it was to investigate the characteristics of the primary school aged child population in *On Track* areas, in terms of a constellation of risk and protective factors. Risk factors included truancy, challenging behaviour, antisocial attitudes, antisocial peers, and protective factors included family factors such as family relationships, and school factors such as satisfaction with school. The survey was designed as a follow-up to previous schools research conducted during Phase One of *On Track*, in 2001, and aimed to measure change over time on key risk and protective factors in the school population in *On Track* areas.

Demographic characteristics of the young people

The sample was more or less equally split between girls and boys, ranging in age from seven to eleven. Almost seven out of ten pupils (68%) gave their ethnic group as White, 11% as Pakistani, 9% Black, 4% Mixed, 3% Bangladeshi, 1% Indian, and 1% Chinese. Eighty three percent of young people said English was the main language spoken at home. Two out of three pupils (66%) said they lived in a household with both birth parents, 22% were in lone parent households, and 10% in 'reconstituted' or step families. Two percent of children lived in 'other' households (lived with grandparents, were in residential care etc).

Key findings

Overall, the picture was generally positive. Most of the 7,433 children in fifty schools who took part in the survey reported good family relationships, high levels of satisfaction with school and positive views of the local neighbourhood. Rates of self-reported bad behaviour and truancy were low, children reported a range of constructive out of school activities, and most pupils did not approve of antisocial behaviour.

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

Family Life

- Overall, the primary school sample reported positive relationships with parents, and most also reported relatively high levels of parental warmth and involvement, and high levels of supervision and consistency of rules at home. For example, 87% of young people reported that their parents *always knew where they were when not at home*.
- Pupils were asked about how often parents read with them at home. Children's self-reports suggested a less than optimal picture. For example, half (49%) said their parents did not often read with them at home.
- Reports by children of problematic behaviour by brothers and sisters were not widespread, although one fifth of those who answered claimed a sibling had been sent home from school for *being naughty, or had been in trouble with the police*.

School life

- Most young people held positive impressions of school with the majority reporting high levels of satisfaction with school. For example, 88% of pupils said that their teachers were kind to them and 87% said they *felt safe* in school. Just over two thirds (68%) said they *liked going to school*.
- In general, self-reports of bad or disruptive behaviour at school were not widespread. For example, nine out of ten pupils (92%) said that they had *never been sent home from school for being naughty*.
- Over half the pupils indicated that they had experienced one or more recent incidents of being bullied or victimised by other pupils. That is, 54% said that in the past week another pupil had either tried to kick them, hurt them, hit them, threatened to hit them, attempted to break something belonging to them or tried to make them give them money.
- In the main, truancy was not an issue amongst most of the children who took part in the survey. Nine out of ten pupils (89%) said they had never taken time off school without their parents' or teachers' permission.

Challenging behaviour, antisocial attitudes and peer groups

- Pupils were presented with a group of statements to ascertain whether they displayed challenging behaviour at home, school or in general. For example, pupils were asked whether they got *angry easily at home or at school*. They were also asked whether they *liked to have their own way, even if it got them in trouble* or whether their friends thought that they were *naughty*. Almost four fifths of the sample reported 'yes' to at least one of these forms of challenging behaviour, probably reflecting a normal level of immature behaviour in a sample of this age.
- To measure the extent of attitudes condoning antisocial behaviour, pupils were asked for their views on how wrong they felt it would be for others their age to *smoke cigarettes, steal from somebody, steal from a shop or start a fight*. Almost all (97%) of the sample believed it would be wrong for someone their age to smoke cigarettes or steal items. However, somewhat worryingly, one in ten children did not feel it was wrong for someone their age to start a fight.

Constructive use of leisure time

- Pupils were asked whether they engaged in a list of 15 out-of-school activities ranging from *watching television, reading, attending an after school club, and being a member of brownies, cubs, scouts or guides*. A high proportion of the sample (92%) said that they watched television after school, 84% said they did homework after school, 76% *helped round the house* and 13% said they were a member of brownies, cubs, scouts or guides. The mean (average) number of after school activities not including television viewing was seven.

Perceptions of the neighbourhood

- Generally pupils were positive about their local neighbourhood. Four fifths said that they *liked where they lived* and three quarters said that they did not want to live anywhere other than their neighbourhood. Seven out of every ten pupils said they *felt safe* when they played out and the same proportion believed there were safe places to play near their home.

The presence of an active On Track service in primary schools

The survey was not able to ascertain whether children (or their family members) had personal experience of an On Track service. However, from background information provided by the On Track projects we were able to count the number of On Track activities based at each primary or middle school to get a simple measure of the level of On Track activity across the sample. The types of On Track services being offered ranged from breakfast clubs and after-school clubs, to group work with children aimed at building children's confidence and self-esteem, to one-to-one counselling and work with families and parents. Primary schools offered services on both a universal (i.e. anyone could attend) as well as a targeted basis (i.e. pupils identified and invited on the basis of need), and the mean average number of services per school was four, with a range from none (no services) to thirteen.

Amongst the sample just over a quarter (26%) of children attended a school with a lower than average number of active On Track services relative to the sample of schools overall, (that is, their school had no or only one On Track service), three fifths attended a school with an average number of services (between two and seven) and one in eight (13%) attended a school with a high number of active On Track services (between eight and thirteen). Overall, it was found that those who attended a school with a higher than average number of On Track services reported higher levels of satisfaction with school and greater constructive use of leisure time.

Children at risk of offending and antisocial behaviour

By combining pupils' responses to some of the risk factors measured - disruptive behaviour at school, truancy, antisocial attitudes and challenging behaviour at home and elsewhere - we were able to identify a 'high-risk' group, who were children who reported a greater than average number of risk factors. Around one in eight of all primary school pupils fell into the high-risk group (13%).

The weaker the level of 'protective' factors in a child's life the more likely the child was to fall into the high-risk group. Put another way, those who reported low levels of parental supervision and

consistency in discipline, low levels of parental warmth and involvement, and low levels of satisfaction with school were the groups most likely to fall into the high-risk group.

Change over time

Exploring changes in the incidence of key risk and protective factors between the first ('Wave One') survey in mid 2001 and the second ('Wave Two') survey in early 2004 was a key focus of the study. Overall, the findings were broadly positive for protective factors, but with mixed results for risk factors. Two key risk factors showed statistically significant reductions in levels amongst the two cross sectional samples taken as a whole, though two risk factors (challenging behaviour and truancy) had got worse.

On three risk factors (bullying and victimisation, antisocial behaviour by siblings and conflict at home) there was no change between the two waves.

In terms of protective factors there were statistically significant increases in four of the five protective factors. The remaining protective factor (constructive use of leisure time) had decreased in strength from Wave One to Wave Two.

Summary of changes in risk and protective factors between Wave One and Two			
	Positive change*	No change	Negative change*
Risk factors			
Attitudes to antisocial behaviour	✓		
Antisocial siblings		✓	
Antisocial peers	✓(some groups only)	✓(sample as a whole)	
Disruptive behaviour at school	✓		
Conflict at home		✓	
Bullying and victimisation		✓	
Truancy			✓
Challenging behaviour			✓
Protective factors			
Parental warmth and involvement	✓		
Parental supervision and consistency in discipline	✓		
Perceptions of the local neighbourhood	✓		
Satisfaction with school	✓		
Constructive use of leisure time			✓

* Changes were statistically significant

Overall conclusions

Most of the findings from the Wave Two primary schools survey were encouraging. However, some specific groups consistently appeared to be doing worse, whether risk or protective factors were examined.

Sex: Boys consistently reported lower levels of protective factors and higher levels of risk factors than girls. This is not an unusual survey finding, and indicates that boys continue to require heightened levels of support at home, in the community and at school. However, it was noticeable when comparing the results in Wave One with Wave Two that girls' challenging behaviour and truancy levels had slightly increased since 2001. Thus interventions should not concentrate on boys' behaviour at the expense of girls, as if the present trends continue, we may find girls' behaviour presenting much more of a cause for concern.

Year group: A clear relationship was noted between certain factors and age. Generally, things got worse as children got older. For example, satisfaction with school was highest amongst Year Three pupils (those aged seven years old), decreased slightly for Year Four pupils, decreased again amongst Year Five pupils and was lowest amongst Year Six pupils (ten and eleven year olds). Similarly, disruptive behaviour at school, attitudes to antisocial behaviour and reported levels of associating with antisocial peers increased steadily with age. As children moved up a year they were also increasingly likely to find themselves in the high-risk group. However, an exception to this general pattern was self-reported truancy, which was considerably higher in Year Three pupils compared to all other year groups, and experience of being bullied. It is possible that the higher rates of truancy are associated with the high rates of victimisation amongst this group. Further research is required to substantiate this. Other positive points were also noted amongst the older age groups. For example, involvement in after school activities (constructive use of leisure time) increased with age. Furthermore, it was found that marked improvements in general had occurred for Year Five and Six pupils since the first wave of the schools survey.

Family structure: Young people in reconstituted (step) families showed a consistent tendency to do worse than other groups. Those in two birth parent

families always did best, whilst those in lone parent households came between the two extremes.

Ethnicity: South Asian young people tended to report the highest levels of protective factors and the lowest levels of risk factors in all domains: home, school and wider community. On the other hand, young people from Black or mixed heritage groups were consistently over represented in the ranks of young people reporting high levels of risk factors.

Changes over time: Overall, the changes between the two waves of the survey were broadly encouraging, in that almost all protective factors increased, and two risk factors also showed clear improvements. Less positive results related to levels of bullying (remaining unchanged), and truancy, which apparently increased over time. We cannot be certain of the role that On Track itself has played in these changes, as the surveys alone do not provide all the background contextual information, or the information on 'exposure' to On Track services at the individual level that we would need to be able to assess this. Later strands of the national evaluation will however provide more context, and in time we may be better able to understand whether On Track, or other unrelated factors, are most likely implicated in the positive changes visible amongst the primary school population. However, though we cannot be entirely certain of On Track's role in these changes, it is clear that in many ways things are improving for children in schools in these On Track areas and, with the important exception of truancy from school, even where they are not improving measurably they are in general not getting worse. Given the research evidence of generally poor outcomes for children living in high crime, high deprivation areas, we conclude that this survey gives us a number of reasons to feel encouraged, as well as helping us pinpoint the aspects of risk in children's lives - both at home and at school - that may need more intensely preventative efforts to help improve outcomes in the future.

Methodology of the survey

Data were collected through paper self-completion methods in supervised sessions in schools, repeating a questionnaire used in Phase One. In total 7,433 children took part in the survey from forty-four primary schools and six middle schools (pupils in Year Five and Six only). Schools were sampled using a simple random stratified sample of all schools in On Track areas who had taken part in the earlier 2001 survey, and within schools, all classes in all year groups

were invited to take part. Overall, 86% of primary school pupils and 85% of middle school pupils who were eligible to take part in the survey completed a questionnaire. The sample of schools was verified as being representative of all schools in the On Track areas in terms of school make-up and other demographic indicators.

Additional information

The full report of the primary schools survey and appendices are available on the website for the National Evaluation of On Track Phase Two, at www.prb.org.uk. They 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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