

Targeting Prolific and Other Priority Offenders and promoting pathways to desistance: Some reflections on the PPO Programme using a Theory of Change framework.

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Abstract

The Prolific and Other Priority Offenders (PPO) programme was introduced in 2004 to target the most prolific and persistent offenders within Community Safety Partnership¹ areas. Based on identifying offenders through local crime analysis, intensive supervision and targeted intervention, evaluations have shown promising results. By using a 'theory of change' approach as an analytical framework and a local PPO project as a case study, this paper begins to question whether the rationale behind the PPO programme can be viewed as 'plausible', if key strands of implementation are 'doable' and if the desired outcomes are 'testable'. The paper argues that although the rationale for the PPO programme might be plausible, doubts are raised over its likely impact on local crime rates and the extent PPO projects might be able to effectively target prolific offenders. Finally, it suggests that although testable outcomes can be established, the extent to which the programme has enhanced our understanding of desistance is questionable.

Key words: Prolific and other priority offenders, persistent offending, desistance

Word Count: 9,200

Introduction

The Prolific and other Priority Offender (PPO) programme was introduced in September 2004. Its main purpose was threefold: (1) to prevent and deter young people from becoming prolific offenders; (2) to catch and convict prolific offenders and (3) to rehabilitate and resettle prolific offenders (Dawson, 2005). Although a number of projects had targeted 'persistent' offenders prior to 2004, this was the first time there was a statutory obligation for local Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) to implement such a programme in their area.² As Farrall et al. (2007) assert, the programme was implemented because of a desire to target those offenders deemed to be responsible for committing a

disproportionate number of offences. Indeed, a number of studies have suggested that a small proportion of offenders commit a high proportion of all crime (Blumstein et al., 1986; Home Office, 2001, 2003, 2004; OCJR, 2004) and it has been estimated that around 10% of all offenders commit around 50% of all offences (Home Office, 2001).³ Therefore, the PPO programme sought to target the most prolific offenders as it was thought that setting the most active offenders on the path to desistance would yield benefits in terms of reductions of crime, harm to the community and associated criminal justice costs of processing offenders (Home Office, 2003).

Although a wide range of research has described the development of the PPO projects (Vennard and Pearce, 2004; Dawson, 2005; Farrall et al., 2007), little critical analysis has been carried out of the impact on local crime rates or how the programme has informed our understanding of desistance for prolific offenders. This is surprising for two primary reasons. First, as over 10,000 offenders have now been referred to the PPO Programme, a rich body of evidence and experience is now likely to exist within Community Safety Partnership areas about the interventions and approaches to offender supervision that work (or do not work) with prolific offenders. Second, the publication of the 'Breaking the Cycle' Green Paper by the Ministry of Justice in 2010 (Ministry of Justice, 2010, 2012) promises what Raynor (2012: 945) describes as a 'rehabilitation revolution which would focus the entire penal system on a primary goal of reducing re-offending'. This 'revolution' is to be delivered through a framework of Integrated Offender Management, where local partnerships would coordinate and manage offenders (Home Office/Ministry of Justice, 2009b), and interventions would be delivered by private and voluntary organisations 'underpinned by a system of payment by results' (Raynor, 2012: 945). Therefore, much of the experience in relation to the implementation and impact of the PPO programme is of direct relevance to the vision outlined in the Breaking the Cycle Green Paper.

This paper explores the PPO programme within a 'theory of change' framework (Connell and Kubisch, 1998). This framework has previously been used to develop a structured understanding of the theories that drive crime prevention programmes. As Connell and Kubisch (1998) argue, for any programme or initiative to achieve its potential, it should be guided by a theory of change that is present before the programme and should be revisited both during implementation and throughout the evaluation. The theory of change framework is principally guided by three core questions that offer a useful exploratory framework for the PPO programme:

1. **Is it *plausible*?** Do evidence and common sense suggest that the activities, if implemented, will lead to desired outcomes? In the case of the PPO programme, is it plausible to expect it to impact on local crime rates through targeting the most prolific offenders?
2. **Is it *doable*?** Will the economic, technical, political, institutional and human resources be available to carry out the initiative? In the case of the PPO programme, will local PPO projects be able to implement the programme?
3. **Is it *testable*?** Is the theory of change sufficiently specific and complete for an evaluator to track its progress in credible and useful ways? In the case of the PPO programme, how is success measured and how does this inform our knowledge of what works with offenders?

The 'theory of change' framework not only allows the researcher to determine whether the intended programme is centred around a plausible theory that is 'testable', but questions around 'doability' also invite exploration of more practical issues that can often beset successful implementation. Such questions might include how various partners work together to implement a programme at the local level, the political tensions that might affect these relationships and how resource constraints can hinder successful implementation. Using the framework, this paper considers whether the PPO programme is *plausible*, *doable* and *testable*. First, through using data from a case study area as an illustration, we explore the extent that targeting offenders who might be identified as 'prolific' could impact on local crime rates and thus whether the overall aim of the programme is *plausible*. Second, we consider the extent to which the PPO programme is *doable* through analysis of the referral process in the case study area and by highlighting some of the challenges experienced with implementation. Third, by drawing upon national evaluations of the PPO programme and analysis of data from the case study area, the question of *testability* is explored. While this demonstrates that several national evaluation studies have used credible measures as indicators of success, the usefulness of such measures in informing the literature about desistance from offending is limited. Finally, some concluding comments are made.

Methodology

The data presented were collected for two separate projects; both are related to the same PPO area, a medium sized city with a population of approximately 200,000. Within the area, between 800 and

1,000 offenders are supervised by the Probation Trust at any one time and there is an expected PPO caseload of 30 to 40 per year. The PPO project was set up in 2004 and is a partnership between the Police, Probation Trust, Youth Offending Service and Community Safety Unit. One dataset was built to establish the proportion of recorded crime committed by prolific offenders across the city between April 2009 and March 2010 and to place their offending within a historical context. The second dataset was constructed to track the progress and outcomes for a cohort of offenders who accessed the project between April 2006 and March 2008. A brief description of each dataset is given below.

The PPO project required analysis of the offending histories of all active offenders between April 2009 and March 2010 as there was little local knowledge about the extent to which this population had been criminally active prior to this period. Therefore, a dataset was developed by matching records for all known offenders to their full criminal history recorded on the Police National Computer (PNC). It is acknowledged that a variety of measures can be used as indicators of criminal activity, such as arrests, recorded offences and convictions. In this case the measure of offending was recordable offences where there was a substantive outcome such as a conviction at court, a caution, reprimand or final warning.⁴ This was not only able to tell us about the extent of offending prior to April 2009, but also the types of offences committed. In total, 22,915 crimes were recorded in the sample period of which 28% (n=6,335) were detected. Sufficient details were available in PNC for 3,131 offenders relating to 86% (n=5,427) detected crimes included in the analysis presented below.

It is important to bear in mind that there are three main limitations with these data. First, the dataset is based on recorded crime and such statistics under-record the extent of offending (Maguire, 2012). Second, only a small proportion of offences are detected to an offender (28% in the present dataset) and many of these detections might be a reflection of police priorities or what Garside (2004: 18) refers to as targeting 'the usual suspects'. Third, and linked to this point, there are significant variations in detection rates by crime type. Figure 1 presents the rate at which offences were detected across the city. This shows that the detection patterns observed broadly reflect the national patterns, with detection highest for drug offences, other offences and violence.⁵ Overall, these data can therefore only be seen to partially reflect the true extent of crime across the city and they only provide data on a proportion of active offenders. However, they are also the main source of data available on which the PPO project could base their strategy.⁶

Figure 1. Proportion of crimes detected by crime type across the PPO area compared to national detection patterns.



Base: recorded crime in PPO area for 2009–2010 (recorded crime= 22,915: total detections = 6,335) compared to national detected rates (adapted from Flatley, Kershaw, Smith, Chaplin and Moon, 2010).

In addition to the recorded crime data, records were collected in relation to a cohort of 21 offenders referred to the local PPO project between April 2006 and March 2008. Records held by the PPO project and PNC data were collated in an attempt to build a picture of the offending patterns of the offenders both two years before and after acceptance to the project, the time spent on the project and the interventions received by offenders. The data problems highlighted above also relate to this data set; additionally, there were often gaps in data records relating to individual offenders that made assessment of each individual case history problematic. For example, records in relation to the interventions offenders received and when they were completed were not fully recorded in PPO project records or in Offender Assessment System (OASys) records.⁷

Is the PPO Programme Plausible? PPO's and local crime patterns

The concept of 'plausibility' generates two questions in relation to the PPO programme. Firstly, whether the programme is likely to impact upon local crime rates and secondly, if targeting PPOs will reduce their rate of offending. In this section, we consider the likely impact on local crime rates. We return later to the question of the impact on individual offenders.

The proportion of crime that can be attributed to a 'PPO group' is, of course, dependent on how the group is defined. Since the implementation of the first Home Office funded projects to target prolific offenders in 2002, the official definition of a prolific offender has been altered three times.⁸ The Intensive Supervision and Monitoring Projects (which ran from 2002) defined the target group as those 'aged 18 or over with six or more offences in the last 12 months of liberty'; the Persistent Offender Scheme (which ran from October 2002 to September 2004) defined 'core persistent' offenders as 'those over 18 and convicted of six or more recordable offences in the previous 12 months' and the current PPO programme allows the local area to select offenders, taking into account the nature and volume of crimes, the nature of harm caused and other locally developed criteria in relation to the impact on the community (Farrall et al., 2007: 354). Dawson and Cuppleditch (2007) argue that current local discretion is required because the selection criterion of the Persistent Offender Scheme was thought to be too rigid.⁹ Current Home Office guidance to PPO projects states that projects should be managing offenders who are 'committing most crime and causing most damage in the local community' (Home Office, 2009a:10). Coupled with this, the guidance also suggests that each PPO project should tackle 'the right number of offenders' (Home Office, 2009a:12) with 15 to 20 PPOs to be targeted per annum in smaller CSP areas and 60 to 100 in larger areas.

Therefore, the local definition of a PPO can determine the number of offenders targeted and any potential impact on local crime rates. This is explored below through the analysis of recorded crime data from one PPO area. Within this area, those offenders with six or more offences recorded in the previous 12 months were most likely to be considered for selection as a PPO, with priority given to those with ten or more offences. Therefore, the categories created for the analysis included: offenders with more than ten offences recorded in 2009-10 (the most prolific); offenders with six to 10 offences recorded (prolific); those with two to five offences and; those with only one offence recorded. As Table 1 illustrates, there were a total of 3,131 known active offenders in 2009-10 and they committed a total of 5,409 offences or just under 25% of all recorded crime. However, the majority (around 80%) of all detected offences were committed by offenders who were not defined as prolific. Indeed, the most prolific offenders (those with more than ten offences) constituted less than 1% of the offending population and committed fewer than 8% of all detected offences (less than 2% of all recorded crime). Even if one considers the extent of offending by all offenders with 6 or more offences recorded, this

equates to less than 20% of all detected offences or fewer than 5% of all recorded offences for the year.

Table 1. Number and proportion of offences recorded by known offenders in the PPO area (2009–10)

Offender groups	Number of known offences	Proportion of all detected offences (%)	Proportion of all PPO area recorded offences (%)
More than ten offences (1% of all offenders: n=26)	414	7.6%	1.8%
Six to ten offences (3% of all offenders: n=83)	605	11.1%	2.6%
Two to five offences (26% of all offenders: n=830)	2,198	40.6%	9.6%
One offence only (70% of all offenders: n=2,192)	2,192	40.5%	9.5%
Total (offender count=3,131)	5,409	100%	23.5%¹⁰

Base: 3,131 offenders.

Although caution needs to be taken when comparing the local data to national estimates, the analysis suggests that the proportion of crime committed by the most prolific offenders in the PPO area is not as high as national studies estimate. Overall, the top 15%¹¹ (n=463) of offenders committed less than 10% of all recorded offences, which is less than the Home Office estimate that 10% of all offenders commit around 50% of all offences (Home Office, 2001). However, if we consider offending by crime type (Table 2), some interesting patterns are observed. Table 2 presents the proportion of detections that relate to all prolific offenders (the 109 offenders with 6+ offences in the previous year) and the average number of offences committed by these offenders is compared to the non-prolific offenders (per 100 offenders). Overall, although only three out of every one hundred offenders could be defined as 'prolific', nearly half of all detections for burglary and over a third for robbery and theft related to a 'prolific' offender. As one might expect, the prolific offenders also recorded substantially higher numbers of offences than the non-prolific offenders (934.9 per 100 compared to 145.3 per 100).

Table 2. The offence profile of PPOs and the average number of offences committed (per 100 offenders) compared to non-PPOs

Offence type	Proportion of detections	Average number of offences per 100 offenders	
		Prolific offenders (6 + offences)	Non-prolific offenders
Burglary	44.8	83.5	3.7
Robbery	37.7	21.1	1.3
Theft	30.1	519.3	43.5
'Other' offences	21.5	45.0	5.9
Criminal Damage	14.5	56.9	12.1
Fraud	13.3	18.3	4.3
Violence	9.7	167.9	56.6
Drugs	4.7	22.0	16.2
Sexual	0.0	0.0	1.8
All	18.8	934.9	145.3

Base: 109 offenders with 6 or more offences recorded in 2009-2010 compared to 3,022 non-prolific offenders. PPO offence count = 1,019. Non PPO offence count= 4,390.

Despite the fact that a group of prolific offenders can be identified and that they contribute to a significant proportion of detections for some crime types, the finding that even the most prolific 109 offenders contribute such a small proportion of all offences raises questions about the potential impact of the PPO programme on local crime rates. In addition, the Home Office recommended the target number of offenders for PPO intervention in the case study area was substantially less than 109 offenders per year. Therefore, only a proportion of the most prolific offenders could be selected for PPO intervention. Also, further analysis of offending records revealed a relationship between previous and current offending that raise further questions about the potential of the PPO programme to reduce crime rates. The data were placed into the historical context through analysis of the length of criminal career and the rate of offending over the course of the criminal career for all known offenders.¹² This revealed that 80% (n=2,513) of offenders had some record of offending on PNC prior to 2009-10 and (as Table 3 illustrates) there was surprisingly little variation in the average length of criminal career across the offending groups. For example, offenders with more than ten offences recorded in 2009-10 had a mean criminal career length of 11.5 years compared to 9.2 years for those offenders in the one offence group. The data also show that offenders with more than ten offences

recorded in 2009-10 are, historically, also the most prolific (this group has 32 previous offences recorded on PNC, an average of 2.7 offences per each year of their criminal career to date). However, what is striking about these data is the high proportion of offenders across all groups with long criminal careers. For example, over 55% (n= 1,206) of offenders who recorded just one offence in 2009-10, had a criminal career of over ten years (with an average of 11 previous offences), as did 70% (n=575) of offenders in the two to five offence group (who averaged 17 previous offences), 75% (n=62) in the six to ten group (with an average of 28 previous offences) and 69% (n=18) in the most prolific group (with an average of 41 previous offences).

Table 3. Mean number of offences recorded on PNC, length of criminal career and offences per each year of criminal career for the active criminal population

	Mean number of previous offences recorded on PNC	Mean length of criminal career in years	Mean number of offences per year of criminal career
More than ten offences in 2009-10 (n=26)	32	11.5	2.7
Six to ten offences in 2009-10 (n=83)	23	12.3	1.9
Two to five offences in 2009-10 (n=830)	13	11.4	1.1
One offence only in 2009-10 (n=2,192)	7	9.2	0.7

Base: 3,131 offenders.

Therefore, the data not only reveal a relationship between the extent of current offending and offending history, but they also show that many active offenders persistently offend over long periods. Debates exist about the best way to define 'persistent'. As noted by Soothill et al. (2003: 82), 'it is not always clear whom commentators are referring when they speak of persistent offenders'. Indeed, the terms 'prolific' and 'persistent' offender have often been used interchangeably and have both been measured by using arrests (Wolfgang et al., 1972), offences committed (Home Office, 2004) and convictions (Soothill et al., 2003; Farrington et al., 2006) as indicators of criminal activity across varying periods in the lives of offenders. The data presented above suggest that a useful distinction can be made between the 'prolific' and 'persistent', where 'prolific' might be used to describe short-term, heavy bursts of offending and 'persistent' to describe offending that continues over a period of

time, but is not necessarily 'prolific'. This is illustrated in Table 4, where the categories of 'prolific' and 'persistent' are used to generate typologies according to the current offending activities and offending history of the sample group. For the purpose of this analysis, an operational definition of persistent offender is used: any offender who committed 6 or more offences prior to April 2009 is considered persistent (prolific offenders are defined as those who committed 6 or more offences in the 12 months between April 2009 and March 2010). Using this definition, less than 1% (n=9) of all active offenders could be described as *prolific*, but 3% (n=100) could be described as both *prolific and persistent*. However, 42% (n=1,335) of all active offenders could be described as *persistent but not prolific*, as this group recorded over 6 offences historically, but less than six in 2009-10. Overall, 74% (n=896) of offenders with criminal careers of over ten years were identified as *persistent but not prolific* and a total of 61 offenders (or 2% of the offending population) had criminal careers of over ten years and were both *prolific and persistent*.

Table 4. Proportion of offenders active in 2009-10 identified as 'prolific', 'persistent' or 'neither' by length of criminal career

Length of criminal career	Offending groups and proportion of offenders				
	Prolific but <u>not</u> persistent	Persistent but <u>not</u> prolific	Both prolific & persistent	Neither prolific nor persistent	Total offenders (by length of criminal career)
Less than two years (25% of all offenders)	<1% (n=6)	1.4% (n=11)	<1% (n=6)	97% (n=766)	100% (n=789)
Two to five years (15% of all offenders)	<1% (n=2)	24% (n=118)	3% (n=15)	72% (n=346)	100% (n=481)
Five to 10 years (21% of all offenders)	<1% (n=1)	46% (n=310)	3% (n=18)	51% (n=337)	100% (n=666)
Over 10 years (38% of all offenders)	0 (n=0)	74% (n=896)	5% (n=61)	21% (n=236)	100% (n=1,193)
% of all offenders	>1% (n=9)	42% (n=1,335)	3% (n=100)	54% (n=1,685)	100% (n=3,129)

Base: 3,129 offenders where offending history known

As might be expected, the highest average number of offences per offender was recorded for prolific offenders in 2009-10, but offenders defined as *persistent but not prolific* were responsible for the largest proportion of recorded crime. In summary:

- The offenders who were *prolific but not persistent* (<1%: n=9) committed 1.4% of detected offences (n=77) or less than 1% of all crime: an average of 8.5 offences each.
- The 42% (n=1,335) of offenders who were *persistent but not prolific* committed 42% (n=2,296) of detected offences or 10% of all crime: an average of 1.7 offences each.
- The 3% (n=100) of offenders who were *prolific and persistent* committed 17% of detected offences (n=940) or 4% of all crime: an average of 9.4 offences each.
- The 54% (n=1,685) of offenders who were *neither prolific nor persistent* committed 39% of detected offences (n=2,114) or 9% of all crime: an average of 1.2 offences each.

Is the PPO programme doable? The implementation and operation of the PPO programme

Connell and Kubisch (1998) assert that a strategy will be 'doable' if the economic, technical, political, institutional and human resources are available to carry it out. As the PPO programme was implemented via central government, it might readily be argued that there was a political desire from the centre to deliver the programme from the outset. In the case study area, informal interviews with partners involved in delivery suggested there was also a belief in the rationale behind the PPO programme and a desire to deliver the programme at the local level. However, as Bullock et al. (2006) identify, implementation weaknesses are common in such projects. In relation to the case study area, such problems surfaced around two broad themes: everyday operational practices and resource constraints.

The operation of PPO projects is dependent on partnership working. Berry et al. (2011: ii) suggest successful partnership working is based on the identification of problems of which there is a 'mutual benefit in tackling'. In the case study area, there were clear mutual benefits to be gained from referring appropriate PPOs to the project and in managing them effectively. Referrals to the project

were selected at monthly PPO partnership meetings. At that meeting, a number of agencies (such as the police, Drug and Alcohol Action Team, Youth Offending Team, Probation Trust and PPO coordinators) came together to discuss details of the offenders to be assessed for suitability to enter the project using a matrix scoring form. Although any agency could make a recommendation for a referral to be made, researcher observations revealed that the majority were made by local police Inspectors who would bring a list of potential referrals to meetings. The dominance of the police in this process was a legacy of previous projects focusing on persistent offenders that were often managed by police officers and located in police stations. Therefore, the centrality of the police in the process generated a perception that the PPO project 'was a police project'.

The reliance on the police as a source of referrals did, however, have a 'knock-on' effect. It was observed that some Inspectors were more rigorous than others in bringing names forward for discussion and this meant prolific offenders from some parts of the city might not have been referred. Indeed, this was thought to partially explain the low number of PPOs referred over the evaluation period. In total, 21 offenders were referred, which was less than might have been expected for the size of the PPO area and the number of referrals that, according to Home Office recommendations (Home Office, 2009a), should have been made. The problem in getting referrals 'to the table' was driven by two factors. The first related to resources. Turley et al. (2011) assert that resource pressure is commonly felt by practitioners at a local level as new 'top-down' initiatives are implemented. In relation to the PPO project, the pressure on police resources affected the referral process as police officers were often unable to free-up resources to conduct the analysis required to identify potential referrals. Coupled with this (the second factor), there was no formal analytical system for checking whether prolific offenders were being missed in the referral process.

These findings suggest that the resource pressures felt by the police had implications for the 'doability' of the project. In addition, several offender managers also commented that even with the relatively small number of PPOs referred to the project, there was still an additional strain on the Probation Service. In particular, the supervisory element of the PPO programme, which often required several meetings between offender managers and PPOs per week (as opposed to weekly or fortnightly meetings), placed additional stress on the offender managers' time, who were already under pressure to supervise large caseloads. This finding resonates with wider debates about the role

offender managers might play in the process of desistance (for an overview of many current themes, see McNeil et al., 2010). As Turley et al. (2011) note, since the implementation of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), there has been a growing perception amongst offender managers that their role is simply to place offenders into appropriate interventions and to manage them through their sentence, rather than to perform the roles more traditionally associated with that of a probation officer (such as one-to-one supervision of offenders). However, several authors have noted that probation is currently seeing a cultural shift back to using one-to-one supervision to support desistance through initiatives such as the Offender Engagement Programme¹³ (Raynor, 2012; McNeill et al., 2012; McNeill and Weaver, 2010). Although any initiatives that promote desistance are to be welcomed, offender managers need to have both the experience and the capacity to closely supervise those offenders who might benefit most from such attention. As McColloh (2005: 18) illustrates, such time pressures may hinder the possibility of effective supervision as 'being listened to' is thought to be one of the most useful methods in addressing the offenders' social problems.

Although effective supervision is likely to be of key importance, further issues were also identified in relation to the availability of interventions for offenders and the need to free-up capacity within the PPO programme. This is recognised nationally in the revisions to the PPO de-selection guidance made in 2009 (Home Office/ Ministry of Justice, 2009a). The initial recommendation made in 2005 was to try to 'de-select' PPOs after 12 months; this was later revised to 6 months as it was thought some PPO's were being kept on the programme for too long. Indeed, this revision appeared to be born out of a desire to 'see a more rapid churn of offenders through the PPO than is currently the case' (Home office/ Ministry of Justice 2009a: 16). Although strict de-selection criteria are in place, an observation from our research was that there was not enough capacity in the PPO area to place offenders into appropriate interventions and it was common for many offenders to return to substance misuse and offending after de-selection (often at a point of crisis such as a relationship breakdown, or losing employment or housing). This suggests that the pressure on the PPO project to increase 'the churn' of offenders could have negative consequences.¹⁴

Is the PPO programme testable? Prolific offenders and pathways to desistance

A 'theory of change' is 'testable' if it is specific and sufficiently complete for an evaluator to track its progress in credible and useful ways (Connell and Kubisch, 1998). To date, four studies have tested the efficacy of the PPO programme by using outcome measures such as convictions and offending.¹⁵

A synopsis of these studies is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. National evaluations of PPO projects: Synopsis¹⁶

Name of study	Method	Main Findings
Early findings from the National PPO evaluation (Dawson, 2005)	Outcome analysis of 7,801 PPOs (who entered the programme between September and October 2004).	10% fall in recorded convictions of PPOs in first six months of programme.
Impact Assessment of the PPO programme (Dawson and Cuppleditch, 2007)	Sample of 7,801 offenders identified in September and October 2004 and 7,557 tracked over 17 months. Attempt to develop valid comparison group failed. Limited analysis of interviews with 60 offenders and 52 PPO staff.	62% reduction in recorded convictions and 43% reduction in offending for the PPO group in the period 17 months after entry compared to 17 months pre-entry. Offender interviews suggest additional support impacts upon offending.
Results from the 2008 cohort of PPO's (Home Office, 2010a)	Analysis of 'proven offending' (convictions) across 171 partnership areas and for a cohort of 10,771 PPOs. Comparison of offending from April 2008 to March 2009 to previous year.	Proven offending was 29% lower in 2008/09 than the previous year. There was a reduction in offending in 117 partnership areas, but an increase in 20 areas. Large reductions observed in breach and bail offences.
Results from the 2009 cohort (Home Office, 2010b; Home Office/MOJ, 2009a)	Analysis of 'proven offending' (convictions) across 173 partnership areas for a cohort of 10,635 PPOs. Comparison of offending from April 2009 to March 2010 to previous year.	Proven offending was 39% lower in 2009/10 than the previous year. There was a reduction in offending in 146 partnership areas.

These studies demonstrate that the PPO programme is 'testable'. However, questions might be asked about how success is measured and the extent to which these studies inform the research literature about long-term desistance or termination from crime. Farrall et al. (2007: 360) argue that desistance is a complex process where offenders often 'zig zag' their way to desistance. As scholars such as Laub and Sampson (2001) and Piquero (2004) have observed, this complex process might be characterised by periods of desistance before termination or permanent cessation of offending is reached. Thus, for Laub and Sampson, termination is the stage when offending stops and desistance is the causal process that leads to termination. Maruna and Farrall (2004) agree with this distinction,

but also acknowledge that the path to termination might not be straight-forward as crime-free periods can be mistaken for termination, rather than a period of desistance. Therefore, they distinguish between 'primary' and 'secondary' desistance with the former defined as 'any lull or crime free gap' and the latter when there is a permanent cessation of offending.

Farrall et al. (2007) note that the requirement of central government for quick indicators of success has posed a challenge to evaluation research in this area as desistance is both difficult to measure (as it is the absence of an event) and any true measure of desistance requires long-term monitoring of offenders. At present, the evaluations of the PPO programme tell us about short-term reductions in convictions or offending, rather than long-term paths to desistance or termination of offending. For example, Dawson (2005) assessed changes in convictions over a six month follow-up period; Dawson and Cuppleditch (2007) followed-up the offending patterns of the cohort for 17 months and both the 2008 and 2009 PPO cohort studies (Home Office, 2010a; Home Office 2010b) had a 12 month follow-up period. Farrall et al. (2007) observe that many evaluations of similar projects have been based on short follow-up periods as there has been political pressure to present quick results. However, this short-termism appears to contradict what the literature (and the analysis presented earlier in this paper) suggests about the long-term process of desistance, most notably that many offenders can have crime-free periods within their criminal career or 'zig zag' their way to desistance. Therefore, the reductions in offending observed in the studies might potentially be a cohort of offenders going through a lull in offending, who will eventually resume their criminal career.¹⁷ Indeed, in the case study area, prolific offenders tended to be referred to the project at the peak of their offending and what followed could partially be explained as a natural reduction or 'regression to the mean' effect. Thus, the follow-up periods used in these evaluations provide an indication of primary desistance rather than any firm evidence of termination or that the offenders had altered their identity from one of 'prolific offender' to 'non-offender'.

A further issue also relates to the claims that are made about the success of the PPO programme through analysis of an entire cohort of offenders. For example, Dawson and Cuppleditch, (2007) report a 62% reduction in convictions for the PPO cohort and the 2008 and 2009 cohort reports suggest reductions in offending were observed in 117 and 146 partnership areas respectively (Home

Office, 2010a; Home Office 2010b). Such claims can mask the possibility of a significant variation in outcomes within cohorts of offenders. By way of illustration, Table 6 presents offending outcomes for the 21 PPOs in the case study area for both two years pre- and post-referral. Overall there was a 38% reduction in the number of offences recorded for the 21 PPOs in two years after referral, with 400 offences recorded in the pre-period compared to 247 in the post-period. At face value this appears to represent success. However, four different patterns of offending can actually be observed post PPO intervention. For four offenders the frequency of offending could be described as ‘persistent and increasing’ as offending had increased since referral. One offender could be described as ‘persistent’ as the same number of offences was recorded in the pre- and post-period. Fifteen offenders were persistent but were slowing down and one offender had desisted from offending and could be described as being in a period of primary desistance or even termination. Therefore, despite an overall reduction in offending, only one member of the cohort could actually be considered to be at the point of termination and fifteen were *possibly* on the path to termination.

Table 6. ‘Persisters’ and ‘desisters’ in the PPO case study sample¹⁸

PPO type	Number in cohort (n=21) (the number of offences recorded in the two years pre- and post-project inclusion appear in brackets)
Increased offending	4 (pre offences = 40: post offences = 78)
Persistent	1 (pre offences=9: post offences=9)
Persistent, but slowing down	15 (pre offences=339: post offences= 160)
Period of primary desistance or termination	1 (pre offences=21: post offences= 0)
All offenders and offences	21 (pre offences=400: post offences=247)

Base: all 21 offenders in the cohort

Whilst both the national evaluation research and our analysis of a local PPO project show that many PPOs slow down or desist from offending for a period after engagement with the PPO project, little research has specifically focused on the factors that promote the process of desistance for PPOs.¹⁹ Although some studies suggest that an increase in control and supervision for offenders can help to promote an initial period of primary desistance (Dawson and Cuppleditch, 2007; Vernard and Pearce, 2005), little research has considered how PPO intervention can promote secondary desistance or termination from offending. The charge might also be made against the policy-led evaluations cited

above that they do not engage at all with academic developments in relation to desistance. Indeed, the growing body of literature in relation to criminal trajectories and turning points could help evaluators develop a more nuanced understanding of the process of desistance for prolific offenders (Laub and Sampson, 1993; Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Carlsson, 2012,). Laub and Sampson, (1993: 8) define criminal trajectories as ‘a pathway or a line in development over the lifespan’ that are shaped by ‘interactions of human agency, life course events, situations and historical processes’. During the lifespan, these interactions, events, situations and processes generate ‘transitional points’. These are changes in the lives of individuals (such as employment or marriage) that may alter social control, routine activities and the self-image of the individual (Carlson, 2012). These transitional points may offer an offender fresh opportunities and new choices that may develop into ‘turning points’ in their lives. However, Laub and Sampson (1993) assert that a new direction can only be considered a ‘turning point’ after a sufficient amount of time is spent on this course.

Therefore, in order to better understand how PPO intervention helps promote desistance for prolific offenders, it needs to be ascertained what *opportunities for transition* are presented to prolific offenders through PPO projects and whether these develop into transitional points that could potentially alter social control, routine activities and the self-image of offenders (which in turn could eventually develop into turning points). Within the cohort of offenders in this study, some common themes emerged that not only inform our understanding of the challenges prolific offenders face on their desistance journey, but also raise questions for further research. The evidence from our cohort of 21 offenders was that PPO intervention presented some transitional opportunities for offenders. For example, intensive supervision (having to attend regular appointments) initially served a social control function as this aimed to provide both structure and control to the lives of the offenders. However, this also provided the opportunity for transition as risks and needs were identified (both through OASys assessments and conversations with supervisors) and interventions offered to help change the personal and social circumstances of offenders. For example, in the case of most of the heavy drug users, an attempt to tackle the primary risk-factor associated with offending (drug use) was made through referral to appropriate drug programmes. Attempts would then commonly be made to tackle social issues (such as accommodation problems) and to build protective factors that might improve employment prospects (through educational programmes or training in relation to employment opportunities).²⁰ However, the offers of such transitional opportunities were limited by the lack of

availability of interventions and often the PPO group faced significant problems in dealing with addiction problems before thoughts could be made of engaging in interventions to build proactive factors.

As 20 of the 21 offenders were known to continue to offend, a conclusion might be drawn that this mixture of control and helping offenders to change is only able to foster (at best) short-term desistance from offending. However, it should also be remembered that although transitional opportunities can be offered through PPO projects, it is how offenders use these opportunities in the world external to the criminal justice system that determines the likelihood of secondary desistance. As McNeill and Whyte (2007) assert, the extent offenders are able to use these opportunities to assist desistance is partially determined by their social capital. This concept is defined as 'the resources that inhere in social relationships and networks characterised by shared norms and reciprocal bonds' (McNeill and Whyte, 2007: 27) and it is argued that 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital are vital in shaping the routine activities of offenders. 'Bonding' social capital refers to the close ties offenders may have with family and friends, whereas 'bridging' social capital refers to more distant ties within a wider network of acquaintances. Anecdotal evidence from offender managers and PPO caseworkers in the case study area suggested that many PPOs lack the necessary social capital to turn transitional opportunities into turning points. Indeed, it was believed that many PPOs found it difficult to desist from crime over the long-term because the support networks (that could be fostered through close relationships with family and friends) were not in place and for many their only close or 'embedded networks' (Flynn, 2011: 182) were with other drug users or petty criminals. Related to this, many PPOs are known in their locality as 'offenders' and 'problems', which serves to reinforce their self-image as an offender (and can also help to attract further police attention). This not only resonates closely with McNeill and Whyte's (2007) assertion that persistent offenders tend to have very little licit social capital (which damages their prospects for desistance), but also with research findings that emphasise the importance of 'places' or 'environments' in generating further criminality. For example, several scholars (Carlson, 2012; Flynn, 2011; Farrall et al., 2007; Rex, 1999) have suggested that being able to cut off ties with both 'place' and the 'past' can also be important in shaping desistance for offenders.

Of course, the claims we can make about the impact of PPO intervention on the desistance journey from our small cohort of 21 offenders are, at best, tentative. However, our analysis is not intended to evaluate impact, but rather to point to areas that require further exploration. Although some research suggests that PPO intervention may promote short-term desistance from crime for some prolific offenders, little consideration has been given to the journeys offenders make through the PPO programme and the factors that promote or hinder desistance (such as specific interventions, offender supervision, or the social contexts of offenders). Indeed, a more nuanced account of the factors that promote secondary desistance for prolific offenders could be achieved through offender narratives that explore the relationship between their criminal trajectories and how both the opportunities for transition presented through the PPO intervention and wider social contexts impact upon desistance (or in many cases do not). Of course, the term 'PPO' also implies that this group of offenders are in some way homogenous. Therefore, further research might also need to explore different typologies or subsets of the PPO group. For example, some assessment of the impact of PPO intervention on offenders who are long-term *persistent and prolific* compared to those who can only be considered short-term *prolific* might prove a fruitful starting point for further exploration.

Concluding comments

Prolific offenders remain a focal point of current criminal justice policy. Indeed, the Breaking the Cycle Green Paper (MOJ, 2010; MOJ 2012), which drives current policy on rehabilitation and sentencing, notes the importance of tackling prolific offending and proposes to tackle the problem through the use of Integrated Offender Management and encouraging the rehabilitation of offenders (Home Office, 2009b). However, policy makers should be reminded that many similar sentiments to those expressed in the Green Paper were also expressed in relation to the inception of the PPO programme. In this paper, it has been highlighted that although the development of the PPO programme might be based on what was thought to be a logical set of principles, a number of problems exist in relation to the 'plausibility', 'doability' and 'testability' of the programme.²¹

Targeting the most prolific offenders in order to rehabilitate appears logical, though our analysis of local crime data questions the plausibility of the programme to impact upon local crime rates for two principal reasons. First, as the most prolific offenders appear to be responsible for a relatively low proportion of all crime, even successful intervention with all 109 prolific offenders in our case study

area might not yield substantial reductions in local crime rates. Second, the Home Office recommendation that less than 50 PPOs should be referred in the area per year means that fewer than half of the most prolific offenders could be selected for PPO intervention. Although these two observations raise critical points about plausibility, issues of definition and in particular the distinction between the 'prolific' and 'persistent' require further consideration. Previous research has used the two labels interchangeably, though our analysis of *prolific offending* as 'short-term heavy bursts' and *persistent offending* as 'long-term persistent offending' revealed that a large proportion of offences can also be attributed to long-term career criminals, many of whom have been criminally active for over ten years but in 2009-10 could not be defined as prolific. Indeed, a high proportion of crime appears to be committed by a pool of 'career' criminals. However, why some offenders become more prolific for periods of time or at specific periods of their criminal career is a question that requires further research.

These questions of plausibility aside, the 'doability' of the programme was jeopardised as the political desire to develop a response to prolific offenders from Whitehall was not matched with the appropriate resources to implement a local strategy effectively. Although there was a political will to implement the PPO programme locally, the programme placed further resource pressures on the CSP area due to the requirement to deliver intensive supervision and to ensure PPOs were placed into appropriate interventions. As Turley et al. (2011) identify, this resource pressure is commonly felt by practitioners at a local level as new 'top-down' initiatives and policies are passed down from central government. Indeed, one could argue that it is such resource pressure that determines which offenders are accepted to PPO projects, rather than any definition of prolific or persistent.

Of course, the primary aim of the PPO programme is to reduce the offending activities of prolific offenders. Our analysis showed that the programme was 'testable' and that national evaluations point to overall reductions in re-offending for the PPO cohort. However, it was also observed that these studies are primarily based on short-term measures of reconviction/ re-offending and they fail to provide a nuanced understanding of the process of desistance for PPOs. The failure of the national policy-based literature to engage with the academic literature on desistance represents a major limitation. In the case of prolific offenders, a more promising route towards understanding desistance might be in understanding the transitional and turning points of offenders that places emphasis on

desistance as a 'process' rather than an 'event'. The value of such an approach might not only be in generating a better understanding of how the combination of PPO intervention and external life events can promote or hinder desistance, but also in beginning to establish a body of research literature in relation to our most prolific offenders that could better inform policy. The Breaking Cycle report outlines how offenders will be managed (through Integrated Offender Management) and how payment by results is to become central to the delivery of rehabilitation (Downy, Kirkby and Sherlock, 2010; Nicholson, 2011; Fox and Albertson, 2011). The impact of these reforms remains to be seen. However, in this age of austerity, the concern is that the appropriate resources will not be available to provide the supervision and intervention that some prolific offenders might benefit from and that short-term indicators are used to test payment by results interventions rather than the long-term theoretically based evaluations that are required to build a better understanding of 'what works' with prolific offenders. Therefore, the concern is that rather than 'break the cycle', current developments might only see the cycle continue.

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Notes

¹ Formerly these were Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) in England and Community Safety Partnerships in Wales. Throughout this paper, CDRPs are referred to as Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs).

² Prior to 1995 there were a number of small-scale projects in operation, though in 2002 the Home Office funded 15 Intensive Supervision and Monitoring Projects. These later became part of the Persistent Offenders Scheme that required all 43 police forces to run projects focusing on core offenders. In 2004 this was developed into the British Prolific and Other Priority Offenders Strategy.

³ It should be noted that Garside (2004:16) is critical of the claims made in the 2001 Home Office study and states there is 'slippage from what the figures might reasonably show to what the politicians wish to claim'. Townsley and Pease (2002: 324) also remark that the assertion that a minority of offenders commit a high proportion of crime may partially be based on police practices and thinking.

⁴ These excluded breach offences and summary motoring offences.

⁵ The 'other' group includes offences such as blackmail, absconding from lawful custody and affray.

⁶ On occasion the police also refer to intelligence information, though the reliability of this can be questionable.

⁷ This is the standard assessment system for offenders.

⁸ A number of projects targeting prolific offenders were in existence from 1995, but these were locally funded, rather than part of a national programme.

⁹ However, whilst it might be argued that national direction can be too rigid, locally developed criteria leads to variation across CSP areas and therefore makes comparison problematic.

¹⁰ This is lower than the overall detection rate due to missing data on offenders.

¹¹ In the PPO area it was not possible to calculate the proportion of offences committed by the top 10% of offenders.

¹² Although the data are unable to tell us about the exact duration of the criminal career, an estimate was made by using the date of the first recorded offence as a proxy measure. This is problematic as many criminal careers begin a long time before the offender is actually arrested for an offence. Therefore, the data presented here are likely to be a significantly underestimated.

¹³ The Offender Engagement Programme (OEP) seeks to investigate the hypothesis that one-to-one work with those under probation supervision can promote behavioural change.

¹⁴ A note of caution is needed here – the original guidance was written when only the PPO existed. A quicker throughput is now in place as, in theory, after 6 months a PPO can be picked up by the next level down of IOM.

¹⁵ It should be noted that a number of studies have also considered what works with offenders generally (Brayford, 2010).

¹⁶ Perry et al. (2009) also conducted a rapid evidence assessment (REA) of over 20 evaluations of interventions with PPOs (UK and USA based). The REA included papers published between 1997 and 2007 and found that drug treatments in the community and in-prison therapeutic communities had the greatest impact on reducing offending.

¹⁷ Indeed, some work has noted that once offenders are sentenced or enter the CJS, there can be a natural slowing down in offender or 'regression to the mean' effect (for example, see Youth Justice Board, 2004).

¹⁸ The data here are presented regardless of 'days at liberty'. Analysis of the cohort per 100 days at liberty revealed that in the two years before referral an average of 2.99 offences were committed compared to 1.78 in the subsequent two years.

¹⁹ Here we refer specifically to national studies. It is understood that several local evaluations of PPO projects have been conducted, some of which have considered the process of desistance more closely than others. However, the findings of such work have not been made easily accessible to a national audience.

²⁰ It should be noted that record keeping on offender engagement with such interventions by the PPO project was poor. Therefore, the proportion of offenders actually offered such intervention is not clear. Interviews with offender managers suggested all of the cohort would have been offered education and employment if their risk assessment had identified Education, Employment or Training as a need.

²¹ Of course, caution needs to be expressed as the data are drawn from one PPO area, though many of the issues raised here are thought likely to be generic to many areas.