

ESRC Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development (PADS+) Large Grant Evaluation

Evaluation summary

Background

As part of the ESRC Evaluation Committee's decision to adopt a more strategic approach to its research investment evaluations, it was agreed that a number of new evaluation approaches would be piloted by the Office. In 2014, the Committee agreed that the Office should proceed with piloting an assessor review evaluation, involving a light touch approach and the use of paid assessors (three academics and two users) along with Case Officer and Research Committee Liaison Member interviews. The evaluation criteria included: grant design, research quality, achievements, and scientific and economic impact. The Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development (PADS+) Large Grant was selected as the pilot assessor evaluation because it was the only Large Grant at the time to have completed the final reporting process.

The Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development (PADS+) Large Grant was built on work from a preceding ESRC grant, Peterborough Adolescent Development Study, which was one of three longitudinal studies and four research centres in the ESRC Priority Network: Social Contexts of Pathways in Crime (2002-2007). The main aim of PADS+ was to advance our understanding of the causes of crime through the detailed study of people (their characteristics and development), social environments (their features and emergence), and, crucially, how they interact (how different people are exposed to different environments and how this explains their differential crime involvement).

A particular aim of PADS+ was to develop a new theory (Situational Action Theory) and new methods (Econometrics combined with Space-Time Budget) to improve the study of young people's offending and its changes. An important additional aim was to analyse the findings from the study in regards to their implications for improving crime policy and crime prevention.

According to the Principal Investigator's End-of-Award Report, PADS+ was officially funded from 5 November 2007 to 4 November 2012, but was awarded a no-cost extension to 31 December 2013. The total budget allocated to the grant was £2,619,022.82, of which £91,853.51 was returned to the ESRC.

The grant's five nominated outputs are:

- Wikström, P-O H, Oberwittler, D, Treiber, K and Hardie, B 2012. *Breaking rules: The social and situational dynamics of young people's urban crime*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Bouhana, N and Wikström, P-O H 2011. Al Qa'ida-influenced Radicalisation: A Rapid Evidence Assessment Guided by Situational Action Theory. *Counter terrorism research and analysis*.
- Wikström, P-O H 2009. Crime propensity, criminogenic exposure and crime involvement in early to mid adolescence. *Monatsschrift für Kriminologie und Strafrechtsreform*, 92, 253-266.

- Wikström, P-O H 2010. Explaining crime as moral actions. In: Hitlin, S and Vaisey, S (eds) *Handbook of the Sociology of Morality*. New York: Springer Verlag.
- Wikström, P-O H, Tseloni, A and Karlis, D 2011. Do people comply with the law because they fear getting caught? *European Journal of Criminology*, 8, 401-420.

Academic quality, achievement and impact

Overall, the evaluation evidence shows that PADS+ was successful in achieving scientific impact and in doing so has made a major contribution to the field.

Documentary evidence notes that the Large Grants Commissioning Panel had acknowledged that it would take time for a project like PADS+ to produce and publicise the outcome of a big longitudinal study. While the number of publications is lower than expected of standard Large Grants, assessors state that outputs that have been produced are of a high quality and are internationally recognised, as evidenced by strong citations and publications in leading journals.

All assessors and interviewees were undisputed about some of the achievements claimed in the End-of-Award Report, notably the development of SAT which they considered to be one of the most internationally influential explanatory theories of social behaviour particularly in respect of crime causation. For example, a number of assessors note that the theories and methods were either being replicated or developed in four new studies overseas which they believe is an indication of a direct impact attributable to the grant. In addition, assessors believe that SAT has addressed the shortfalls in the UK's empirical research base.

The grant's research design, which included a sample of 700 young people and their families in Peterborough over a 10-year period, was praised by assessors for being truly innovative and appropriate in delivering its aims.

Economic and societal impact

It is evident that the Grant engaged non-academic user audiences both in policy and practice, however it appears that impact on policy may take longer to realise. Documentary evidence notes that the Commissioning Panel recognised that PADS+ had the potential to influence public policy but felt that its proposed communication and user engagement plans were not sufficiently developed to realise this potential. These plans were subsequently revised by the PI, and there is considerable evidence in the EOA Report that the grant actively engaged with policymakers in the Home office and practitioners at a local, national and international level (eg local constabularies, crime prevention partnerships, national crime prevention councils and local prevention partnerships abroad). However, most assessors (one academic and two users) note that there is no hard evidence of impact on the user community that it has been in contact with. In addition, assessors believed that more work was needed if the grant was going to be fully translated into impact on public policy and crime.

Grant management

PADS+ was considered unusual at the time as it was one of two data resource projects funded under the Large Grants Scheme (between 2007-2013) rather than through Research Resources.

Assessors saw no evidence in the EOA Report to suggest there were any issues with the management of the Grant. In fact, most assessors suggested the management was commendable. However, it is worth noting that the Commissioning Panel commented on the potential shortfall in management support and as a result a deputy director was appointed to assist the Principal Investigator, though their contribution has not been documented. One assessor notes that the bulk of the work fell on the PI. This, in turn, has had an impact on the level of support being given by the ESRC office.

Conclusions

Assessors regarded the following as some of the Grant's key successes: placing UK criminology research onto the international stage; achieving a high impact on theory; introducing new innovative methodologies; and creating an important and unrivalled dataset that can be used for further study and analysis by the PADS+ team and others. The assessors also identified some areas for improvement and suggested that more work needs to be done to translate the findings into policy and practice guidance and to popularise the output to make the research more appealing to politicians and policymakers.

All assessors commented that the ESRC investment was money well spent and that the work should receive further funding (whether from the ESRC or other funders) to enable the continuation of the longitudinal data and to allow further development of multidisciplinary integration.