

Life-Courses, Social Change and Politics: Evidence for the Role of Politically-Motivated Structural-level Influences on Individual Criminal Careers.

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Abstract

Criminal careers research is one of the largest fields of research in modern criminology. However, it has almost exclusively focussed on individual-level explanations of onset, maintenance and desistance. In this paper, and in part inspired by recent work by John Braithwaite (and others), we argue that criminal careers research needs to attend in greater detail to the macro-logical processes which shape offending careers. Herein we outline key conceptual elements, which, when incorporated with life-course theorising may offer a way to include specific social, economic, cultural, historical and political influences on criminal careers. Our aim is to examine a key knowledge gap within developmental and life course criminology (namely, the role of politically-motivated policy choices) and to propose a possible solution to this. In so doing, we summarise our recent research exploring the role of political processes on criminal careers using birth-cohort data. We highlight the need for life-course and developmental criminology to explore the detailed role of structural-level processes in the explanation of individual-level offending careers. As such, our paper presents new directions for examination and empirical research.

Key words: life courses; developmental criminology; politics; theoretical development; structuralism.

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Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues – and in terms of the problems of history-making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles – and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the sociological imagination and the making of societies will occur ...” Mills (The Sociological Imagination, page 259).

Introduction

This quote, taken from the very last page of C. W. Mill’s treatise on the purposes of sociology, provides one of the starting points for this paper, which seeks to forge new connections between the life-course perspective (especially as it applies to the study of criminal careers), historical and constructivist institutionalisms (which provides an insight into how structural processes can shape individual life-courses), and social and economic change. A further starting point comes in the form of John Braithwaite’s *Macrocriminology and Freedom* (2022). Anticipating our goal of more fully incorporating the role of structural processes (such as social and economic policies and over-arching political philosophies) into explanations of criminal careers, Braithwaite and others have recognised such macro-logical concerns as being absent from theories of offending. Robert Sampson, for example, has noted that macro-logical social process and processes of social change were missing from current explanations of criminal careers (2015:278-9; see also Sampson, 2019). German sociologist Mayer similarly argued that the “unravelling of the impacts of institutional contexts and social processes ... on life-courses has hardly begun” (2009:426). He added that “we know next to nothing about how the internal dynamics of life-courses and the interaction of developmental and social components of the life-course vary and how they are shaped by the macro contexts of institutions and social policies.” (p426). As Neil and Sampson succinctly put it, the “individual-level focus in longitudinal research on testing the invariance of the age and crime relationship has implicitly held history, or social change, at bay” (2021:1131). In this paper we outline the limited work undertaken to incorporate macro-level processes into explanations of individual offending careers, summarise the life course perspective, introduce some of the ideas from historical institutionalism and report on our recent research which sought to integrate macro-level processes (and in particular, the ideologically-driven choice of public policies which were seen to be in tune with ‘free market’ capitalism) into the explanation of individual-level criminal careers.

Whilst life-course criminology has focused on institutions such as families, schools, employers and communities, other institutions and organisations (such as governments, the policies and philosophies which they promote and the policy vehicles for delivering on political aspirations), have not received much attention at all. The role of welfare regimes, specific social and economic policies, the discourses and policy ‘tones’ adopted by governments and the immediate and longer-term impacts of these, have been missing from our accounts of why

some people commit crime. Herein we urge those studying criminal careers to explore more thoroughly than hitherto some of the more 'distal' influences on criminal careers, such as the choices made by political leaders relating to which national social and economic policies are chosen for a country. Since the focus of our work has been on the immediate and lasting effects of one particular UK government, the framework we adopt relies heavily on historical political science, with ideas drawn from historical institutional thinking (Pierson 2004) and constructivist institutionalism (Blyth, 2002, Hay 2011), combining these bodies of work with existing theorising from the life-course perspective, before applying them to empirical data on offending careers.

An Outline of the Remainder of this Contribution

The rest of our paper unfolds along the following lines. In the next section we recount the work which has sought to incorporate an awareness of macro-level processes into the explanations of crime and offending careers, noting that these have tended to be theoretical endeavours. We then briefly review key concepts in the life-course perspective. Because this literature is well-known to many readers of this journal, we keep our review concise. Following this we outline historical and constructivist institutionalisms, before providing some context to our recent research which incorporated structural-level processes in the study of individual offending careers. This study examined the role of politically-inspired social and economic change (in the form of 'Thatcherism') on offending careers.

Previous Thinking on the Structural Drivers of Individual Offending

Despite the lack of empirical studies of criminal careers which draw upon the causal properties of macro-level social and economic factors, there have been some theoretical efforts to inject an understanding of such processes. These have mainly been of a narratives style, based on summarising a number of different studies in order to construct an argument that political, economic and/or social processes and change has influenced criminal careers. John Hagan (1997) reviews social and economic changes in the USA since the 1950s. He concludes that during the 1980s, the USA witnessed "increased unemployment and income inequality", the "loss and only partial replacement of core sector manufacturing jobs", and the creation of "less stable and poorer paying service sector jobs" (1997:289). These processes, along with spatial concentrations of poverty, meant that the social structures of many US cities were radically changed. Hagan argued that social contexts including poor schools and little legitimate employment increased the risks that individuals would rely on illegal activities for their income, (1997:290). Young argued that (in the UK), for individuals to avoid being drawn into offending, they needed decent careers, good quality housing, communities which gave them a sense of cohesion and belonging, and lower levels of income inequalities, (1992:45). More recently still, and based on ethnographic research, Wacquant has shown how the relationships between the state, civil society, capitalism and the market have socially, economically and spatially reconfigured many cities in many post-industrial societies, leaving the urban poor, black and under-privileged increasing marginalised.

Via processes of economic restructuring, argues Hagan, individuals become embedded in contexts which increase their chances of being drawn into criminality. The absence of employment makes successfully navigating the transition to a law-abiding adulthood almost impossible. Similar points were taken up by Farrall et al (2010), who point to changes in the availability of legitimate employment, the rise of the 'knowledge economy', the use of pre-employment criminal record checks to highlight the problems that such trends present for young working- or lower-class males. Benson (2002) also addresses macro-logical influences on criminal careers. Reviewing what is known about crime over the life-course, and relating these to recent changes in the US's economy and society, Benson notes how rising divorce rates from the 1960s meant that young people were less subject to informal social control (2002:173). This, he argues, resulted in increased opportunities for offending. Benson also describes how the US economy shed hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs after the 1960s. Such job losses affected the poorest the greatest, especially young, working-class men, where the loss of apprenticeships and jobs in traditional trades had a major impact. In keeping with Hagan's arguments, Benson points to increases in residential segregation and polarisation. Benson concluded his examination of structural changes by arguing that "Criminologists working in the life-course tradition have not yet devoted as much effort to understanding contextual effects on trajectories in crime as they have to studying the parameters of careers at the individual-level" (2002:185).

Benson also touched on the US's 'war on drugs' and resulting imprisonment binge. Both of these were heavily politicised government policies, promoted first by politicians of the right (such as Regan and, in the UK, Thatcher), but soon adopted by centralists such as Clinton and Blair. The imprisonment binge started in the 1970s, and saw the US incarceration rate for 1925-1970 rise from around 110 per 100,000 to 645 per 100,000 in 1997. In many cases the increases fell disproportionately on white working-class Americans and Black or Latino Americans.

Whilst these contributions have made the case for the existence of structural influences on criminal careers (such as employment, family-processes and the response of the criminal justice system), they did not demonstrate this with empirical analyses. Instead, both Hagan and Benson 'read across' existing studies, using them to construct an argument, rather than empirically proving their theorising with original analyses. Meanwhile, Wacquant's urban sociological work takes place outside of criminal careers theorising. Echoing some of these sorts of concerns, Braithwaite (2022:38) characterises what he refers to as 'micro-criminology' (with a concern on individuals, their interactions and life-courses), and contrasts this with a 'macro-criminology' concerned with institutions and whole societies. He later adds (2022:49):

"The usage of macro-criminology herein is similar in that it involves a shift to aggregated patterns of crime, putting particular emphasis on the shift away from simply understanding why some kinds of individuals are more likely to commit crime (micro-criminology's preoccupation), or why particular neighbourhoods might have more crime, or why particular situational crime-prevention techniques might work (examples of meso-criminology). This conception of macro-criminology also has much in common with macro-sociology, as the study of large-scale social systems, long-term patterns and societal processes."

As an alternative to micro-criminology, macro-criminologists, Braithwaite argues, ought to focus on “criminalised spaces, times, life-courses and macro-historical trajectories” (2022:54; 75). Although pre-dating Braithwaite’s call to arms, more recent work in this field has started to explore detailed macro-level influences on offending careers using empirical data sets. Park et al (2021), for example, explore the role of relative deprivation on violent behaviours in South Korea, finding that perceptions of relative deprivation (but not objective levels themselves) drive violence. DeMarco et al (2021) demonstrate that punitive contact with the criminal justice system is associated with later debt levels. Neil and Sampson (2021), use data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods study (PHDCN) to show that the influence of economic deprivation and low self-control (two key explanations of individual offending) varied by birth cohort – suggesting that *changing* macro-logical contexts play a part in who becomes involved in offending. Writing in a slightly different tradition in criminology, Wacquant (2019:29) shows how the state has played a pivotal role in the social and spatial production of advanced marginality, going on to note (2019:30) that instead of social welfare, the response chosen was penalty. Despite this work, few have conceptually or empirically assessed the extent to which politically-motivated changes in public policy have affected the engagement in crime by different cohorts. In other words, whilst we may be developing evidence that macro-logical processes affect rates of offending over individuals’ life-courses, few have demonstrated that this is due to the policies pursued by a *specific political administration*.

Outlining the Life-Course Perspective

The life-course perspective has had a profound impact upon criminological theorising since the early-1990s. In fact, a considerable degree of contemporary criminology’s theoretical tool-box is borrowed heavily on the insights of life-course scholars (e.g. Giele and Elder, 1998, Elder and Pellerin, 1998, Dannefer, 2003, Ferraro and Shippee, 2009). The life-course perspective has sought to trace the links between macro-level social and economic history and social structures, and the lives of both adults and children and the communities they live in. The perspective has been described as seeking to explore “pathways through the age differentiated life span”. This entails researchers in this tradition exploring those “expectations and options that impinge on decision processes and the course of events that give shape to life stages, transitions and turning points”, (Elder, 1985:17). Of all of the theoretical apparatus, two concepts stand out as central to this perspective; the notions of ‘trajectory’ and ‘transitions’. The first of these refers to the line of development of a relationship or process over the life-course (for example, the ‘career’ of a relationship, going from first meeting, to ‘dating’, marriage, cohabitation and family formation), and the second refers to specific events (e.g. first ‘date’, wedding, first joint home, dates of child-birth, home moves and so on) which may inflect, alter or interrupt a trajectory. As Elder, Modell and Parke note, periods of rapid social change can affect the timing and sequence (and, we would add, occurrence) of events in the transition to adulthood (1993:10). They go on to add that “social-contextual factors have an important impact on the operation of non-social processes” (1993:11). In short, social contexts and changes in these, especially if undertaken rapidly, can affect key events and processes in an individual’s life.

Elder and Giele (2009:8-15) outline a number of aspects of the life-course perspective, such as the need to locate people (individuals, subgroups or age cohorts) in specific communities at specific historical periods (2009:9). This forces one to recognize that individuals are not isolated and are embedded in wider social contexts and relationships. The focus on wider social and economic structures (Elder 1995, Antonucci and Aikyama, 1995, Moen and Hernandez, 2009) highlights the fact that individuals' lives are linked to one another. As such, events and long-term trajectories in the lives of parents in a family may alter the life-courses of their offspring. As interconnected individuals age, so they form what is referred to as a 'social convoy' (Antonucci and Aikyama, 1995); a group of people who move through time together. Moen and Hernandez (2009:259) note that changes in an individual's resources and capital become not just drivers of transitions or turning points in their own lives, but also in the lives of those who are dependent on them. Unemployment for a parent on whom a family had relied will affect not just the individual concerned, but their dependents too. In this was "each generation is bound to fateful decisions and events in the other's life course" (Elder, 1995:112). Similarly, the individual's social network (such as friends or work colleagues) may also be affected by the individual's loss of work, especially if they too lose their own work. As such, the concept of a 'social convoy' can be extended away from purely family members; school classmates, family members, acquaintances, loosely-engaged strangers and so on can also be considered potential members of such convoys.

Drawing Upon Historical and Constructivist Institutionalisms

Historical Institutionalism is concerned with illuminating how institutions and institutional settings mediate the ways in which processes unfold over time (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992:2). Hall defines an institution as "the formal rules, compliance procedures, and standard operating practices that structure the relationship between individuals in various units of the polity and economy" (1986:19). For others, the focus of historical institutionalism is on the state, government institutions and social norms (Ikenberry, 1988:222-223). Sanders notes that "If [historical institutionalism] teaches us anything, it is that the place to look for answers to big questions ... is in institutions, not personalities and over the longer landscapes of history, not the here and now" (2006:53). Historical institutionalism, then, is an attempt to develop understanding of how political and policy processes and relationships play out over time coupled with an appreciation that prior events, procedures and processes will have consequences for subsequent events. This focus on the *longue duree* means that events and processes which may have taken place years or decades previously still carry explanatory weight. In short, causal processes and influences can be 'slow-moving' (Pierson, 2004:13). As Pierson argues, "many of the implications of *political* decisions ... only play out in the long term" (2004:41, emphasis added). Historical institutionalism is key for us due to its focus on politics and the *longue duree* because of its focus on the ways in which path dependencies (which for Sewell, 1996:232-233 means "what happened at an earlier point in time will affect the possible outcomes of a sequence of events occurring at a later point in time") shape long-term outcomes. Path dependence refers to a dynamic process which involves a positive feedback and which generates a series of further outcomes depending on the sequence in which these

events and processes occur (Pierson, 2004:20). As such, once a path has been selected and embarked upon, decisions, events and processes tend to reinforce this path, making the change to an alternative path harder with each step. Over time the paths not taken become harder and harder to navigate back towards and the chosen path becomes more dominant. Whilst historical institutionalists' work has operated at the national-level, it is easy to see how it could be extended to the individual-level; individuals' pathways can be interrupted and shaped by events far beyond their control and can tend to become harder to move away from as time progresses, through processes of labelling (Goffman, 1959), or the adoption of position-practices (Giddens, 1984) which are hard to 'unlearn' or to use in adaptive ways. Similarly, individuals will understand and interpret contexts in specific ways (Stones, 1996).

More recently, another body of 'institutionalist' thinking has emerged out of a dialogue with historical institutionalism, inspired by Hall's more ideationally-sensitive approach (Hall, 1992). Going under the name of 'constructivist' institutionalism, this argues, that historical institutionalism overlooks the role ideas play in shaping political outcomes (Ross, 2011, Hay, 2011). This framework focuses on the ways in which *ideas*, rather than agents, can change or mould institutions and processes. In short, ideas can also influence institutional processes. By bringing a focus on ideas into play, constructivist institutionalism forces us to grapple with the concept of *ideational* path-dependence (as well as *institutional* path-dependence, Hay 2011:68-69). Blyth (2002:15) argues that "ideas give substance to interests and determine the form and content of new institutions". In this way, and akin to theories of the middle range in sociology (see, for example, Giddens, 1984, Bourdieu, 1977, Mouzelis, 2008), actors are viewed as being active (Hay 2011:71) in that they make decisions, have interests, goals and aims. This begs the following questions:

- 1: Can (and do?) ideological influences shape countries' paths through time? Do ideas matter to the policy directions a country adopts? We think the answer to this question is affirmative.
- 2: Do national-level paths shape the life-courses of individuals? If so, which intra-cohort groups might be most affected? Do intra-cohort differences have a spatial dimension?
- 3: Turning to inter-cohort analyses, to what degree have legacy effects (Farrall et al 2020) shaped the life-courses and engagement in crime of successive cohorts of citizens?

Herein we summarise what our own recent research on these matters suggests as answers to the above.

The 1980s New Right and the Radical Reshaping of UK Society

Prior to describing the datasets employed and giving an overview of our research findings, it is incumbent on us to give readers some of the contextual background to the period we studied. This section will illustrate why our answer to 1: above was in the affirmative. Along with several other countries during the late-1970s and early-1980s, the UK elected a 'New Right' government in 1979 led by Margaret Thatcher (Prime Minister from 1979-1990). In the USA

Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980, with Malcolm Fraser elected Prime Minister of Australia (1975-1983) and David Lange Prime Minister of New Zealand (1984-1989). These periods of leadership saw abrupt changes to the underlying, dominant political philosophies in these countries (with the possible exception of the USA, which was already substantially marketised), with monetarism and the free market being given a greater role. Whilst the political leadership at the time was keen to stress that 'there is no alternative' to the policies which they adopted, this is debatable. Even if *some* of the economic changes were unavoidable, other policies choices (selling council houses, not building new ones to replace those sold, allowing interest rates to rise dramatically, tolerating increasing levels of economic inequality, challenging the collective bargaining of trade unions, and marketising schooling and healthcare, for example) were not. Similarly, in the USA there was a focus on cutting welfare spending, restricting eligibility to welfare, reducing tax levels for higher earners, and dismantling social housing. In the UK – the country in which the data we relied upon was collected – the 'monetarist shock' to the system was especially pronounced given the degree of public-ownership of much of the economy. As well as heavy industry (such as coal mining, steel production, and car manufacturing) being largely or wholly publicly owned, large parts of the transport system (buses and trains) were also publicly-owned, as was about 30% of domestic homes, and all of the major utilities (such as gas, electricity, water and coal). Virtually all of these public assets were privatised, with all utilities, transport, coal-mining, steel production, car manufacturing as well as some sections of the criminal justice system, entering private hands at some stage during the 1980s or 1990s. With this was an attendant rise in both unemployment (which especially affected younger people and those living in the industrial heartlands of the English midlands and north, central belt Scotland and south Wales), and levels of economic inequality. The social and economic changes brought about by the Thatcher government, and augmented by the Major (1990-1997) and Blair (1997-2007) governments, created altogether new or altered social and economic circumstances for many UK citizens, and which shaped the events and processes which led to their engagement in offending.

Research Design

In order to assess the impact of this change of political philosophy and its impacts on the life-courses and offending careers of British people, the data we needed had to conform to a number of key requirements. It needed to be collected at the individual-level, be longitudinal, and to include self-reported data (not just related to offending, but to social attitudes and other socio-demographic variables, such as housing tenure, employment and schooling experiences). It needed to cover, ideally, all of the UK (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) or at least Britain (England, Wales and Scotland), to be nationally representative and to include geographic indicators. Ideally, the data needed to cover the experiences of more than one cohort of citizens, since that would enable us to make 'before' and 'after' style comparisons. In addition, given the impacts which these changes were likely to have had on younger people at key stages of their development, data which would cover those entering young adulthood (say 20-25 in 1979) and those who were still at school in 1979 (and ideally aged around 7-16) was needed.

A review of existing datasets which were publicly available found two ideal candidate studies, and these were the ones which we used. The National Child Development Study (often referred to as the 1958 cohort) had an initial sample size of 17,414, all of whom were born in Britain in one week of March 1958. It is believed that the survey reached 99% of live births in that week (Power and Elliott, 2006). Data were collected from or about the cohort members in 1958 (birth), 1965, 1969, 1974, 1981, 1991, 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2013. As well as interviewing the cohort members from 1969, parents, teachers and health visitors were interviewed at various points up to 1981. The British Cohort Study (the 1970 cohort) had a slightly smaller sample size (of 16,135), all of whom were born in one week of April 1970 (again in Britain). It is estimated that the survey reached 95-98% of all live births that week (Anon., 1970:iii). Data was collected in 1970 (birth), 1975, 1980, 1986, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012 and 2016. Again, cohort members were interviewed from 1980, with parents, teachers and health visitors providing interviews during the 1970-1986 period. These two cohorts (which were sampled in identical fashions and often fielded identical survey questions) were born 12 years apart, with the NCDS 1958 cohort reaching the age of 21 in 1979 just as the first Thatcher administration was elected, whilst the BCS70 cohort had just had their ninth birthdays a couple of months prior to her election.

This approach to data collection and analyses is referred to by Elder and Giele (2009: 16) as “pairing strategically related longitudinal samples”. It is important to remember that the two studies are not identical (in that question wordings were sometimes slightly different, and that the timing of the interview sweeps occurred at slightly different points in the samples’ life-courses, although never more than a year or two out of sync). Questions relating to contact with the police and offending were asked of both cohorts, and were identically worded.¹ Questions about victimisation and drug use were also asked in 2000 and 2004 (when the NCDS sample was aged 41 and 45, and the BCS70 cohort was aged 30 and 34). Such data enable direct comparisons between the BCS70 and NCDS cohorts in 1974 and 1986 (when both cohorts were aged 16), and in 2000 and 2004, when both cohorts were well into their adulthood, and engagement in crime ought to have been decreasing or over. The data collected in 1980 (BCS70, then aged 10) and 1981 (NCDS, then aged 23) also allow for child/early-adulthood comparisons at approximately the same moment in time (1980/1981). As such, by using two cohort studies born twelve years apart, the project aimed to highlight “variations and differences within and between individuals as they develop in multidimensional social-historical contexts” (Almeida and Wong, 2009:142).

Overview of Key Findings

Whilst there was much academic debate at the time, and amongst those with an interest in policy-making, there has been relatively little interest in the effects of the Thatcher administrations, at least until recently (Jackson and Saunders, 2013; Farrall and Hay, 2014a). This more recent interest has sought to understand and ‘locate’ Thatcher’s role in a historical

¹ The original surveys did not ask which offences had been committed, however.

sense (and as part of a wider neo-conservative and neo-liberal movement), and to develop an understanding of the ways in which some of the policies which her governments initiated, pursued or developed may have had consequences which took many years to emerge (Farrall and Hay, 2014a/b). In this respect, our theorising was informed by not just the life-course perspective, but (inspired by historical and constructivist institutionalist thinking) also the ways in which social and economic policy-making can affect policy and distributional outcomes. The task was to apply some of the awareness of policy outcomes and how these worked at a national-level to individual life-courses, keeping uppermost in mind the fact that different individuals' life-courses can be affected differently due to their age at the point the policy is enacted, the timing of the changes brought about, variations in the geographic area the individual lives in, and the decisions taken by others (in this case, often their parents). Herein we focus on three key findings which emerged from our studies relating to: economic restructuring, school truancy and offending; economic restructuring, geography and criminal careers; and housing tenure, homelessness and contact with the criminal justice system.

The framework we adopted is shown in Figure One. This figure illustrates how political ideas (developed and expressed when the individuals in Cohort A were very young) may have produced legislation and policies which came into force in their 20s and 30s. As such, these ideas and policies did not affect the numbers of people in that cohort who offended. The same legislation and policies, however, *did* affect the offending of Cohort B (born 15 years later in our diagram). If, as the box in the rightmost bottom corner states, the ideas can be shown to have shaped the policies, and these can be used to explain the differences in rates and durations of criminal careers between Cohort A and Cohort B, then one might conclude that ideologically-induced policy changes shape different cohorts' offending trajectories (producing Inter-Cohort Effects). Keeping in mind the fact that in any society there will be variations *within* any birth cohort due to gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, and further that these may also be spatially-clustered, it is easy to imagine how Intra-Cohort Effects may also be present. Both of these we discuss below – both separately and co-occurring.

[figure one]

Inter-Cohort Effects: Economic Restructuring, School Truancy and Offending

Farrall et al (2020a) explored the causes of truancy from school in the two birth cohorts. Truancy is, of course, a good predictor of engagement in crime (Roque et al, 2017). Using the 1958 cohort (who were at school during the 1960s and 1970s), we were able to show that rates of truancy from school during the 1960s and 1970s were running at about 46% ('some' or 'most' of the time). For the 1970 cohort this rose to 51%. Furthermore, the extent of economic restructuring (operationalised as the shift away from coal-mining and associated industries) which the county in which cohort members were living experienced during the period when they were aged one to ten years of age did *not* play any part in truancy amongst those born in 1958. Nor was economic restructuring related to their later offending (when aged 16-42). For

the 1970 cohort, however, the picture was different. The extent of county-level economic restructuring (defined in the same way as the 1958 cohort) was related to a) the amount of truancy they reported, and b) their later offending at age 16-30. We argued that the county-level economic restructuring experienced by the 1970 cohort (between 1971 and 1981) was largely a result of the monetarist economic policies pursued by the Thatcher government in the early part of their time in office. The monetarist drive made exports more expensive for the manufacturing sector, and started a recession which hit the English midlands and north; this was exacerbated by a mining strike (1984-1985) which affected these same areas, and south Wales and central Scotland. As such, the early-1980s radical right economic policies harmed an already fragile economy, resulting in a loss of manufacturing and associated jobs, and an increase in unemployment. This, in turn, increased school alienation and truancy for the 1970 cohort, and set up conditions (low levels of formal supervision, same-sex peer groups and abandoned buildings in which to hang around and to vandalise) which encouraged the onset of offending. Crucially though, this model was not supported using the (identically-worded, sampled etc.) data for the 1958 birth cohort. This is in keeping with the argument that it was the increase in sudden, geographically-clustered economic restructuring experienced by the BCS70 during their formative years which encouraged their truancy from school and the onset of their offending.

Intra-Cohort Effects: Economic Restructuring, Geography and Criminal Careers

Using just the 1970 cohort, we also assessed the role of economic restructuring as part of a model which included many of those variables associated with the onset of offending (such as school-related and familial processes, engagement in the labour market, and marriage, Farrall et al 2020b). We initially built a structural equation model which did not include economic restructuring, and just contained variables relating to each cohort member's school discipline at age 10, if they were considered by the local authority to be 'at risk' of harm at age 10, their feelings of alienation from school at age 16, the quality of the relationship with their parents at age 16, if they were working at age 26 and the quality of the relationship with the partner (if they had one) at age 29. Two measures of self-reported offending were used in the model; offending at 16 and offending at 30. The model worked well (Farrall et al 2020b:370). To this we then added a measure of economic restructuring, which was significantly related to many of the 'early years' variables. We then reran the model four times, one for each quartile of economic restructuring. The results indicated that not only was economic restructuring related to the onset of offending and the processes associated with it, but that this also varied according to the *degree* of restructuring experienced at the county-level. The greater the degree of economic restructuring experienced in the decade prior to the birth of the 1970 cohort, so the greater the variance in offending explained – rising to 47% for those living in the communities with the highest level of economic restructuring, Farrall et al, 2020b:380). Furthermore, in those places in which there was little economic restructuring, individual-level variables dominated the explanatory model, whilst in those places which experienced greater levels of economic restructuring, it was variables relating to the degree of economic restructuring itself, disruption in family life, and processes in schools which accounted for onset of offending. Social institutions appeared, therefore, to be able to act as brakes on engagement

in crime for those who were living in areas with intermediate levels of economic restructuring, but for those who were living in areas with the highest levels of economic restructuring, the paths from economic restructuring to offending at age 16 and the again from age 16 to age 30 grew ever stronger.

Intra- and Inter-Cohort Effects: Housing Tenure, Homelessness and Contact with the Criminal Justice System

One of the ‘flagship’ policies of the early Thatcher government was the sale of council housing to their tenants. This did a number of things; it was seen as eroding the Labour Party’s bloc vote (since many Labour voters lived in social housing and voted for their ‘landlord’). It was also promoted as a way of supporting families (a key Thatcherite motif). In 1979, just under a third of households were rented to the tenants by local councils. It was occupied by both the ‘respectable’ working-class (those with recognised careers, often working in heavy industry and allied trades, or junior staff in the National Health Service), and in some instances sections of the lower middle-class (teachers, clerics, lower-level managers). As well as selling houses to their tenants, the Thatcher government refused to allow councils to build new ones, which created a) an increased demand for housing for poorer sections of UK society, and b) a dramatic rise in homelessness and insecure living. Over time, council housing started to become the preserve of the most-needy sections of society (the unemployed, ethnic minority groups, single-parents, and those on lower incomes, Farrall et al 2016). We classified both the 1958 and 1970 cohorts into those whose parents already lived in homes they owned, those whose parents bought their council houses, and those whose parents did not buy their council houses. This allowed us to explore the extent to which both inter- and intra-cohort experiences (based on the decisions of one’s parents) were associated with experiences of crime (Farrall et al, 2019).

Again, we found differences *between* and *within* these two cohorts, even though they were born only 12 years apart. Whether or not an individual’s parents had bought their council house was *not* predictive of homelessness for the 1958 cohort. In the 1958 cohort, and UK society more generally, those families who bought their council house were amongst the wealthiest of council tenants – and actually quite rare. In the 1970 cohort, if the cohort member’s parents did *not* buy their council house by the year 2000, the cohort member was statistically significantly *more* likely to have been homeless compared to those whose parents either bought their council house or lived in homes they already owned. Alongside the sale of council housing, the Thatcher governments had scaled back the generosity of the welfare state (Gray et al 2022), making it harder to find cheap accommodation for younger, single people, such as those in the 1970 cohort. Homelessness, of course, is strongly related to both increased contact with the criminal justice system and victimisation. This was especially so for the 1970 cohort. Using these two cohorts, we were able to show that the increased likelihood of homelessness amongst the children of council house non-buyers in the 1970 cohort (an increase relative to *both* other families in the 1970 cohort *and* an earlier cohort of non-buyers) was due to the changes in housing and social security policies enacted by the Conservative

governments from 1980 to 1986. Hence, we concluded that social policies indirectly increased homelessness, victimisation and engagement in crime for the latter cohort.

Conclusions

What this body of work suggests is that socio-economic structural processes (initiated by political actors pursuing a particular ideological and policy agenda) *are* implicated in the onset (and maintenance) of criminal careers. The research we have undertaken has shown that as socio-economic structures change, so they mediate engagement in offending. This varies in two ways: temporal structural variance was found between the two cohorts (inter-cohort differences), suggesting that the influence of structural variables at *t1* may not be the same as those at *t2*. Spatial structural variance was also found, however, suggesting that the processes associated with offending varied by geographic location (intra-cohort differences). The degree to which an individual was drawn into offending appeared to be a function of the extent of the economic restructuring experienced at the areal level – which itself was related to economic and social (i.e. welfare) policies. The communities in which heavy industry had predominated saw more rampant losses in jobs and community cohesion, and increases in alienation amongst young people than was the case in those communities in which agricultural or ‘white collar’ jobs dominated. The contributions which we have made suggest that some of the processes which John Hagan (1997) and Michael Benson (2002) theorised were taking place at the *structural-level* appear to have been operating in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s. This work, therefore, locates criminal careers within a wider framework not simply of socio-economic deprivation, but is able to link this back to specific policies which were to varying degrees politically motivated by key social actors, and has resonances with the work of Wacquant (2008, 2009 and 2014).

Similarly, work conducted in the 1990s by Carlen and colleagues (Carlen 1992, Carlen et al. 1992, Gleeson 1994) explored the role of policymaking and political discourses in truancy. They were able to highlight the *structural* causes of truancy as a corrective to the more common focus on *individual-level* failings. As Gleeson argued ‘The danger is that behaviouralist explanations, which purport to explain truancy in psychological terms, do little more than pathologise such stereotypes, fixing them in popular myth’ (1994:16). Indeed, the overall message of Carlen et al.’s study (1992) is that psychological and behaviouralist explanations ignore (to quote Gleeson) ‘the political, economic and educational consequences of government policy which *condition* such behaviour’ (Gleeson 1994:16). Their study highlighted the fact that previous research into truancy had overlooked the effects of recession, unemployment rates and social security cuts on the labour market, communities, schools, parents and pupils. Herein, we seek *not* simply to replace earlier psychological and behaviouralist explanations, but rather to illuminate the wider background and social-structural causes which motivate and encourage offending. As such, our contribution to criminal careers research, built on the insights developed by others, is to re-emphasize the structural processes *along with* the individual-level factors. Scholars before us have identified the challenges of

integrating history, politics, culture and the local environment in criminological research. Although the importance of these interaction effects and hierarchical relationships has been recognized, few studies have been able to operationalize a multidimensional approach. We believe that our work does so, however.

Recent criminal careers research has started to address and tackle some of the ways in which the 'birth lottery' of history (as Neil and Sampson, 2021 put it), affects which members of which cohorts become increasingly likely to be drawn into trouble. Our own work (Farrall, Gray and Jones, 2019a, b and 2020; Gray et al, 2022) suggests that at least some of the changes in offending careers which we detected at the individual-level can be traced back to a wide-scale policy shift which commenced in the 1980s, and which saw those born in the 1970s more likely to be drawn into crime during the 1990s (i.e. during their 20s) than had been the case for earlier cohorts. If others replicate such findings, both in terms of other data sets in Britain or in other countries, some of our earlier thinking with regards to the causes of offending (and the focus on individual-level failings) may need to be revisited.

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