

# **The Role of Radical Economic Restructuring in Truancy from School and Engagement in Crime.**

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## **Abstract**

Of late, criminologists have become acutely aware of the relationship between school outcomes and engagement in crime as an adult. This phenomenon – which has come to be known as the ‘school-to-prison-pipeline’ – has been studied in North America and the UK, and requires longitudinal datasets. Typically, these studies approach the phenomenon from an individualist perspective and examine truancy in terms of the truants’ attitudes, academic achievement or their home-life. What remains unclear however is a consideration of a) how macro-level social and economic processes may influence the incidence of truancy, and b) how structural processes fluctuate over time, and in so doing produce variations in truancy rates or the causal processes associated with truancy. Using longitudinal data from two birth cohort studies, we empirically address these blind-spots and test the role of social-structural processes in truancy, and how these may change over time

Keywords: truancy; school; offending; anomie; life-course studies; school-to-prison-pipeline.

## Introduction

In recent years, scholars, especially those in North America, have shown a renewed interest in what is now referred to as the 'school-to-prison-pipeline' (Rocque et al, 2017). This phenomenon describes the ways in which schools have become a conduit to the youth and criminal justice systems, whereby those children who do poorly at school, who truant, feel excluded or who are expelled, or who drop out completely, will often end up enmeshed in the juvenile correctional system and later the adult prison system. In fairness, few studies actually study both schooling and imprisonment; most content themselves, as we do, by exploring truancy and later engagement in crime. Many studies rely on individual-level factors and processes to account for truancy. Herein we explore the role played by economic restructuring in triggering alienation from school, truancy and offending, thereby challenging the general accounts which tend to pathologise those young people who truant. One of our aims, then, is to disrupt the mainstream account of neo-liberal criminology which focuses on the individual and suppresses any consideration of wider structural processes and the role of governments in shaping which communities and their members are affected by crime. Building on insights from strain theory, and employing two longitudinal studies of people born in 1958 and 1970, we build a structural equation model to model economic restructuring, alienation from school and offending. The remainder of our paper is constructed as follows: first we outline what is known about truancy and later life-outcomes (including offending). We then critique this literature, arguing that it tends to focus on individual-level factors. Having outlined our research design, we discuss our theoretical model. Drawing on strain theory, we treat truanting as a result of anomic feelings towards formal institutions (such as schools and the labour market). We then locate our study within the wider social and economic changes of the 1980s in the UK. Data from the two birth cohorts we rely on are then examined and contrasted, before we develop a theoretically-informed model of truancy that incorporates socio-economic and political forces and anomic reactions towards formal institutions (such as schools and the labour market). This model we test using structural equation modelling, employing longitudinal data from the NCDS and BCS70 birth cohort studies. We end by reflecting upon what our findings contribute to the scholarship on truancy and the 'school to prison pipeline'.

### **What do we Know about the Relationship between Truancy and Later Offending?**

Research into the relationship between truancy (when a child elects not to attend some or all classes for a day or more) and later offending is not new in criminology. In the middle of the twentieth century, studies in the USA by Shaw and McKay (1942), the Gluecks (1950) and Reiss (1951) all reported associations between truancy, and delinquency or offending and recidivism at a later age. It is accepted that truancy and offending are not directly related to one another in an immediate causal way, but may lead indirectly to offending in adulthood. Garry (1996), for example, argues that truancy is a 'gate-way' into later delinquency. Truants are more likely to use drugs, consume alcohol and become involved in violent activities (Rocque, et al, 2017:596), and are likely to engage in early sexual activities and gang membership (Dryfoos, 1990). However, there is uncertainty about the causal ordering; truancy may lead to drug use and delinquency, whilst these may help to encourage and reinforce truancy. As Rocque et al (2017:593) note, it is still surprising that there have not been more studies of the relationship between truancy and offending in later life. Current thinking is that truancy will lead to offending via a series of 'stepping-stones'; events and processes which leave the individuals involved more likely to commit offences as an adult.

Various characteristics have been found to be associated with truancy itself. At the individual level, truants are usually found to be more likely to be male (Garry, 1996). They are also more likely to dislike school (Attwood and Croll, 2006) and to have achieved fewer qualifications (Farrington, 1980; Vaughan et al, 2013). Those with low non-verbal IQ, 'daring' attitudes, and who were troublesome were also more likely to truant (Farrington, 1996). Familial processes have also been found to be associated with truancy; those from lower income groups (Attwood and Croll, 2006), whose parents give them less attention (Farrington, 1980), have conflictual relationships, are disinterested in education (Farrington, 1980), or who live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Farrington 1980) are more likely to truant than others. Moreover, having a sibling who had behavioural problems or separation from a parent were also associated with truancy (Farrington, 1996). Some school factors have also been shown to be related to truancy, with large school sizes, failure to motivate pupils and poor attendance policies having greater rates of truancy (Strand and Lovrich, 2014). Reid's (2008:337-338) overview of what is known about truancy suggests that styles of school leadership, poorly managed school-to-school transitions, poor or absent pastoral support, poor, or non-existent attendance-monitoring, and the children's exclusion from school decision-making procedures all contributed to truancy. Educational support and early interventions can reduce truancy (Strand and Lovrich, 2014).

In the UK, one of the few longitudinal studies that investigated the relationship between truancy from school and offending as an adult has been the Cambridge Study in Delinquency Development (CSDD). Farrington (1980) found that truancy (measured by self- and teacher-reported data) was associated with later negative life outcomes such as a low status job at 18, smoking at 18 and involvement in crime at 18. At age 32, truancy at school was associated with numerous negative outcomes, including offending (Farrington, 1996). Rocque et al, using the CSDD, extended this work up to age 50, exploring the consequences of truancy at ages 12-14, finding that it was strongly related to criminal convictions at age 50; self-reported offending at 32; problem drinking at 18 and 32; poor accommodation at 48; and employment problems at ages 32 and 48. Those who truanted at school were found to earn less and to have more psychological problems as adults (Robins and Ratcliff, 1980). Kandel et al (1984) found that truants were more likely than non-truants to have unstable employment careers, whilst also being more likely to have broken marriages and more periods of illness. Truants were also found to have higher debts than non-truants at ages 18 and 32 (Farrington, 1996). Hibbett and Fogelman (1990) and Hibbett et al (1990) discerned that truants were more likely than non-truants to experience divorce as adults, to have more dependent children, to be heavy smokers, suffer depression, have lower status jobs and higher rates of unemployment.

Recently Carroll (2013), using National Child Development Study (NCDS) data, reported that truancy contributed, in part, to subsequent social, educational and behavioural difficulties within school, but stressed this was only one part of a multidimensional explanation. Maggs et al (2008) reported that truancy at 16 predicted problematic drinking at 42 for both genders, and the quantity of alcoholic units consumed at ages 16, 33 and 42. Hansen (2003) reanalysing the *Young People and Crime* survey data found that those who truanted were more likely to commit property (p154) and violent crimes (p156). Powis et al (1998) explored school exclusions, rather than truancy; their data revealed that most excluded pupils came from single parent families; few lived in homes with an adult wage-earner; half were from ethnic minority groups, and most had engaged in both truancy and some form of offending behaviour. Drug use was also commonplace and excluded pupils often resided in areas of high deprivation (p254). To summarise, almost all of the long-term studies of truancy suggest that it is associated with a range of long-term negative outcomes, such as depression, substance misuse, offending, and poor quality relationships with employers, spouses and offspring.

### *Critiquing this literature*

Whilst the aforementioned studies rely on high-quality research designs and reputable data sources, there are nevertheless gaps in the framework, which we wish to outline. The major critiques which we extend, and attempt to respond to, focus on:

- a) the dominant behaviouralist explanations employed, and
- b) the absence of explanations which incorporate wider political, social and economic variables into their account of rates of truancy.

Work by Carlen and colleagues (Carlen, 1992, Carlen et al 1992, Gleeson, 1994) highlights the role of policy-making and political discourses in understanding truancy. Their work is an attempt to throw light on the structural causes of truancy as a corrective to the more common focus on individual-level failings. As Gleeson notes (1994:16) “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”. Indeed, the overall tenor of their study (Carlen et al, 1992) is to argue that psychological and behaviouralist explanations ignore (to quote Gleeson) “the political, economic and educational consequences of government policy which *condition* such behaviour” (emphasis in original, Gleeson, 1994:16). In so doing, they emphasise that previous research in this area has overlooked the effects of recession, unemployment and social security cuts on the labour market, communities, schools, parents and pupils, favouring as it does a more atomistic approach. In keeping with this, we seek *not* to replace the psychological and behaviouralist explanations, but rather to illuminate the wider background and social structural causes which motivate truancy (or, perhaps, more accurately, demotivate school attendance). As such, our contribution is to re-emphasise 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. While the importance of these interaction effects and hierarchical relationships have been recognised, few studies have been able to operationalise a multi-dimensional approach. High-quality long-term data is scarce, as is small-area data that is sufficiently sensitive. Drawing upon a range of individual and ecological approaches, the Edinburgh Youth Transitions study explores individual offending histories in relation to the social and physical structure of neighbourhoods, and the dynamics of local communities (Smith and McVie, 2003).

### **Research Design**

Since we were keen to explore changes in the economy, alienation from school, truancy and subsequent engagement in crime at the individual level over time, we required data sets with very specific research designs. Whilst no data sets would ever be perfect for this, the 1970 Birth Cohort Study (BCS70) and the National Child Development Study (NCDS) make appropriate vehicles with which to study the impact of dramatic economic restructuring on successive cohorts of school-age children (we outline both in more detail below). The BCS70 cohort members were born in 1970, and grew up during the 1980s, during which they would have been subject to changes in economic, social welfare, housing and schooling policies. The NCDS were born in 1958, growing up when the welfare state was expanding. Such a research design is described by Elder and Giele (2009:16) as the “pairing [of] strategically related longitudinal samples”. Hence, by using two cohort studies with respondents born twelve years apart, we aim to highlight “variations and differences within and

between individuals as they develop in multidimensional social-historical contexts” (Almeida and Wong, 2009:142).

#### *Outlining the NCDS and BCS70*

The NCDS had an initial sample of 17,414, all of whom were born in one week of March 1958. Data were collected about and from the sample members in 1958 (birth), 1965 (aged 7), 1969 (11), 1974 (16), 1981 (23), 1991 (33), 2000 (42), and at various points since. The sample has maintained very good retention rates, with 9,100 (52%) cohort members being re-interviewed when the survey was last fielded (2013). The BCS70 had a slightly smaller sample size (16,135), all of whom were born in one week of April 1970. Data was collected about the cohort members in 1970 (birth), 1975 (aged 5), 1980 (10), 1986 (16), 1996 (26), 2000 (30), and again since at various points. The sample has generally good response rates, although these were lower at age 16 when the National Union of Teachers was on strike (when about a third of respondents were not reached). Around two-thirds of cohort members have been interviewed at sweeps since 2000, and the sample remains representative of the original births (Gerova, 2006:7). We outline the specific survey questions upon which we rely when discussing the models we develop below.

#### **Thatcherism and the Dramatic Economic and Social Changes of the 1980s**

Let us take a step back and locate the lives of the members of these two cohorts in a wider social and economic context. There is little doubt that the legislation enacted during the 1980s, not just relating to education, but to housing, social security, industrial relations, and the economic policies pursued, had very profound effects upon the UK, both at the time and in the years and decades since. Between 1971 and 1985, some four million jobs were lost from the manufacturing sector. The official document *Social Trends* for 2007 (Office for National Statistics 2007:47) reports that:

“Over the last 25 years the UK economy has experienced structural change. The largest increase in employee jobs has been in the banking, finance and insurance industry, where the number of employee jobs has doubled between June 1981 and June 2006 from 2.7 million to 5.4 million. There were also large increases in employee jobs in public administration, education and health (up by 40 per cent) and in the distribution, hotels and restaurants industry (up by 34 per cent). In contrast, the extraction and production industries, made up of agriculture and fishing, energy and water, manufacturing, and construction showed a combined fall of 43 per cent from 8.2 million jobs in 1981 to 4.7 million jobs in 2006. Manufacturing alone accounted for 81 per cent of this decline, with the number of employee jobs in this sector nearly halving from 5.9 million in 1981 to 3 million in 2006.”

The radicalism of this restructuring extended into the education sector. As Carlen notes, mid-C19th discourses of juveniles being corrupted by poverty and poor parental control, were displaced by a discourse that emphasised the role of pathological, feckless families that produced delinquent children during the late-1980s (1992:254). Ahead of the Thatcher governments’ efforts to cut state-funded school places, a series of right-wing critiques (including the Black Papers and articles in right-wing newspapers) had started to challenge the existing education system. The decline of spending on books in the early 1980s, and the reduction of pre-school places for 3-4 year olds was documented by Timmins (2001:380) and Riddell (1985:151). The March 1980 expenditure White Paper projected a 6.9% fall in expenditure on education in real terms between 1978-79 and 1982-83 (Riddell, 1985:151). Staff-student ratios went up, contributing to greater disruption in classes, more

exclusions, greater levels of staff absenteeism, not helped by the reduction in the status of teachers fostered by government discourse (Gleeson, 1994:16; Jones, 2003:134-35). Timmins (2001:424) notes that in the period between 1984-87, during which teachers were involved in industrial disputes, the government created a demoralised pool of teachers whose loyalty to the job was damaged for years to come. After the *Teachers' Pay and Conditions Act* (1987), the teachers' trade unions were unable to mount effective resistance to the 1988 *Education Reform Act*. The 1988 Act introduced, amongst other things, the marketisation of schools.

Education and schooling policies interacted with other economic and social policies, such as the 1980 *Housing Act* (and the various Acts which followed it), and the impact of economic recession, which eventually saw poorer households concentrated in the social rented sector, and within that, concentrated within particular areas of the UK's urban spaces (Farrall et al 2016). Because schools draw (in the first instance) from local catchment areas (which the Conservatives, it must be acknowledged, tried to challenge), this resulted in schools increasingly bifurcating into 'decent' schools (serving relatively affluent areas) and those which served communities with higher than average rates of deprivation (Gleeson, 1994:17). In terms of the wider economy, unemployment rose from 4.1% in 1979 to 4.8% in 1980 to 8.0% in 1981 (Thomas, 2001:52). After that, it rose (but slightly less steeply) to 9.5% in 1982, and stabilised at around 11% for the five years from 1983 to 1987. One of the first things which the Thatcher government did upon gaining power in 1979 was to increase interest rates, which had the unintended consequence of weakening the UK's manufacturing sector (Thompson, 2014:38-9), producing a sharp fall in manufacturing output between 1979 and 1981 (Thompson, 2014:38). The economy experienced negative growth for much of the early-1980s (Thompson, 2014:39). So damaging were their economic policies that by March 1981, the Conservatives had abandoned their monetarist ideals. However, the UK economy's troubles were not over and widespread economic disruption and the unemployment associated with it persisted for many years.

### **Truancy from School: Trends over Time**

What does the empirical evidence suggest was happening in terms of truancy in schools in the UK at this time? In this section of our paper, we review the evidence on trends in truancy and exclusion using the best available data. It is impossible to find a consistent source of data charting truancy rates going back to the 1970s, or even the mid-1980s. However, there have been a few studies which give some insight into rates of truancy across the UK. Carlen et al (1994:64) report a study by the Association of Chief Education Welfare Officers in 1973 which suggested that truancy rates were 4-7%. A study in Sheffield (Galloway et al, 1985:54) suggested that rates were between 0.3 and 7.5% for 1974-1976, with a mean of 2%. Scottish truancy rates were reported to be 14% in Edinburgh and 17% in Glasgow in 1974 (Carlen et al, 1994:64). For 1975, Carlen et al (1994:64) report a slightly lower truancy rate of 10% for schools in England and Wales, rising to 15% in 1977 for schools in Bolton, (Carlen et al, 1994:139). Raffe's (1986) study of truancy amongst school leavers in Scotland suggests declining rates between the 1975/76 school year and the 1981/82 school year, with around 38% admitting to missing "a day here and there" in 1975/76 to reducing 27% in 1981/82. The Youth Cohort studies (which only covered England & Wales) followed students for the final three years of their compulsory school education (Table 1). The first survey started in 1985, and so the final year of compulsory study for that cohort was in 1987 (one year after that for the BCS70 cohort). For the YCS 1987 leavers, 48% had truanted at some point during their final year of secondary education. Table 1 suggests that around half of the children at school truanted to some extent in the late-1980s to mid-1990s, but that this dropped to about a third by the turn of the century.

**Table 1: Rates of Truancy 1985-2005 (Youth Cohort Study)**

Year	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05
% ever truanted during final year of education	48	49	50	-	48	-	50	48	-	42	-	36	-	35	-	32	-	-	35

What these data suggest are low rates of truancy in the 1970s (somewhere around 10% of children missing some proportion of their schooling would appear to be a reasonable estimation, although the data do fluctuate and the definitions of truancy may vary considerably). In the 1980s, using the YCS data, we see much higher rates (over 40%), which declines from the mid- to late-1990s. Against this background, let us turn to examine how these rates are reflected in the two cohorts we are studying.

### **Analyses of the NCDS and BCS70 Cohorts' Experiences of Truancy**

Previous analyses of the NCDS and the BCS70 have suggested that truancy was equally common amongst the 1958 and 1970 cohorts (Bynner and Parsons, 2003:286-87). However, these analyses did not go beyond descriptive statistics. We start our investigations, naturally, with the 1958 cohort, reporting on their experiences of truancy.

#### *How many of the NCDS cohort truanted from school when they were growing up?*

Questions about the number of half days of school missed (rather than truancy *per se*) were asked of head teachers at various points during the NCDS fieldwork. At age 7, 54% of the NCDS cohort had missed at least one half day, at age 11 this was 60% and 57% at age 16. Given that these data could refer to days of illness or authorised absences as well as truanting, it is hard to draw many firm conclusions from this data. However, when the cohort was aged 16, their teachers were asked if truanting “did not apply”, “applied somewhat” or “certainly applied” for them. This data suggests that at age 16 some 80% of the NCDS cohort members had not truanted, 12% of teachers selected the “somewhat applies” option whilst only about 8% had truanted to the degree that their teachers selected the “certainly applied” option (Table 2).

**Table 2: Rates of Truancy 1974 (NCDS, teacher reports)**

Does not apply	9911 ( 80%)
Somewhat applies	1515 ( 12%)
Certainly applies	958 ( 8%)
TOTAL	12384 (100%)

The NCDS were asked in 2000 (when they were aged 42) about their recollections of truanting at school (see Table 3). This suggested that 46% had truanted at some point when they had been at school.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A crosstabulation of the teachers' data from 1974 (Table 2) and the cohort members' recall of their truancy (Table 4) suggested a very high degree of association. The Chi-Sq value was 903.484,  $p < .000$ .

**Table 3: Rates of Truancy at School (NCDS, self-report)**

Never	6148 ( 55%)
Some of the time	4779 ( 43%)
Most of the time	316 ( 3%)
TOTAL	11244 (100%)

Let us now turn to the later cohort and repeat the analyses undertaken for the NCDS.

*How many of the BCS70 cohort truanted from school when they were growing up?*

At age 10, teachers were asked to account for why cohort members had been absent from school (Table 4). At this point less than one per cent of the BCS70 appeared to have truanted, with only 87 instances of truanting being cited as the explanation of absence at age 10.

**Table 4: Rates of Truancy 1980 (BCS70, teachers report)**

Has not truanted	11750 ( 99%)
Has truanted	87 ( 1%)
TOTAL	11837 (100%)

By age 16 this figure had increased (the question was asked of the cohort member directly, it ought to be noted); now some 44% said that they had been absent from school without having been ill (Table 5) or because they were fed up with school (53%, data not shown). These figures (for 1986) are broadly comparable to YCS data for 1987 which suggested that 48% of children had truanted the past year.

**Table 5: Rates of Truancy 1986 (BCS70, self-report)**

Absent from school but not ill	2491 ( 44%)
Not absent from school	3229 ( 57%)
TOTAL	(100%)

Like the NCDS, truanting was asked of the BCS70 cohort in 2000 when they were aged 30. This suggested that 51% had truanted at some point whilst they had been at school (Table 6).<sup>2</sup>

**Table 6: Rates of Truancy at School (BCS70, self-report)**

Never	5003 ( 49%)
Some of the time	4867 ( 47%)
Most of the time	405 ( 4%)
TOTAL	11244 (100%)

Thus it would appear that about five percentage points more of the BCS70 cohort (51%) than the NCDS (46%) were truanting whilst at school. This suggests that truancy had become *slightly* more

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<sup>2</sup> This data, when crosstabulated it with the data from age 10, did show a strong positive association with the age 30 data, suggesting that the age 30 data was a reliable source of information about truanting 20 years earlier. The Chi-Sq value was 71.195,  $p < .000$ .

prevalent in the intervening 12 or so years and that the percentages of those truanting “all of the time” had gone up from 3% to 4%. Although these differences are not large, we argue that they nevertheless represent an important increase in truancy. Indeed, both a Mann-Whitney U test and a chi sq. test based on a crosstabulation table found that the 1970 cohort was significantly more likely to have truanted than the 1958 cohort (both  $p < .000$ ). It is also the case that suspension rates increased; twice as many of the 1970 cohort reported being suspended than was the case for the 1958 cohort (Bynner and Parsons, 2003:287). All of our subsequent analyses are based on the data as reported at age 30 for the BCS70 and 42 for the NCDS (in keeping with Bynner and Parsons’ analyses, 2003).

### **Making Sense of Truancy and Economic Change in the Life-courses of those Born 1958 and 1970**

Our theorising draws heavily upon the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Writing a century before the period which we are chiefly concerned with, it was Durkheim who coined the term ‘anomie’ to refer to the weakening of the social norms of society and the sense of ‘dislocation’ which this brought about for individuals (1897). It was, however, an American sociologist (Merton, 1938) who adapted Durkheim’s thinking in such a way as to make it operationalisable in empirical studies. Whilst Merton’s essay was initially little used, interest in his thinking grew after the end of the Second World War (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2000:10). Merton’s use of Durkheim’s concept drew on Marxist theories of crime causation, coupled with his own observations of 1930s US society, economy and (recorded) crime rates. Merton reimagined anomie as a socially-based set of discontents which act, over time, to routinely generate deviancy (including crime) as a by-product of everyday activities which promised economic success to all, but which systematically denied success to a great many members of society (Rock, 2007:45). Like many other researchers, we follow Merton’s “underlying premise that the motivations for crime do not result simply from the flaws, failures or free choice of individuals” (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2000:10). Alternatively, and in keeping with structuralist accounts in general, we believe that the causes of crime are related to the cultural and structural processes in which individuals are located and which they need to adapt their behaviours and responses. To summarise, structural-level processes block (or at very least seriously impede) the legal opportunities for social and economic advancement. As a result of this, (some) individuals resort to illegal activities to achieve success and/or status. In some cases, individuals may express their frustration at finding their routes to advancement ‘blocked’ through criminal behaviour (Agnew, 1985). Agnew revised Durkheim’s and Merton’s thinking, arguing that feelings of anomie could also be provoked by perceptions that one was ‘trapped’ in aversive situations. Either way, our argument is that structural-level processes prevent individuals from achieving what they have been encouraged into desiring, and motivate the use of illegal activities to achieve these goals or to simply express frustration. Hence, national and regional crime rates are not simply the ‘aggregating up’ of individual-level action, but rather the outcome of the social forces that shape and mediate individual actions and their context. Governments, therefore, ‘produce’ variations in crime rates through their impacts upon the processes which shape those factors which drive crime. In this way, abrupt and sustained changes in processes which drive crime in turn motivate processes (such as truancy) which are associated with offending at the individual-level. We support Merton’s initial thinking that the pressure towards anomie was socially structured, being greatest amongst the lower social strata (since their chances for advancement are weaker). Accordingly, we argue that the UK’s experience during the 1980s meant that the lower social strata were most affected by the social and economic changes unleashed by Thatcherite policies. From this perspective, theories of anomie offer an avenue to increase understandings of how dramatic social and economic change impact upon society, its organisation and the crime rates it experiences.

Our thinking is supported not just by structural sociology, but also by research by psychotherapists on individual loss. The concept of the assumptive world refers to those beliefs that ground, secure, stabilise or orient people and that accordingly give them a sense of purpose and meaning to their lives as well as providing feelings of belonging and connection to others. Parkes writes that the assumptive world “is the only world we know and it includes everything we know or think we know. It includes our interpretation of the past and our expectations of the future, our plans and our prejudices” (1971:102). Beder argues that the assumptive world:

“is an organised schema reflecting all that a person assumes to be true about the world and the self on the basis of previous experiences; it refers to the assumptions, or beliefs that ground, secure, and orient people, that give a sense of reality, meaning and purpose to life.” (2004:258)

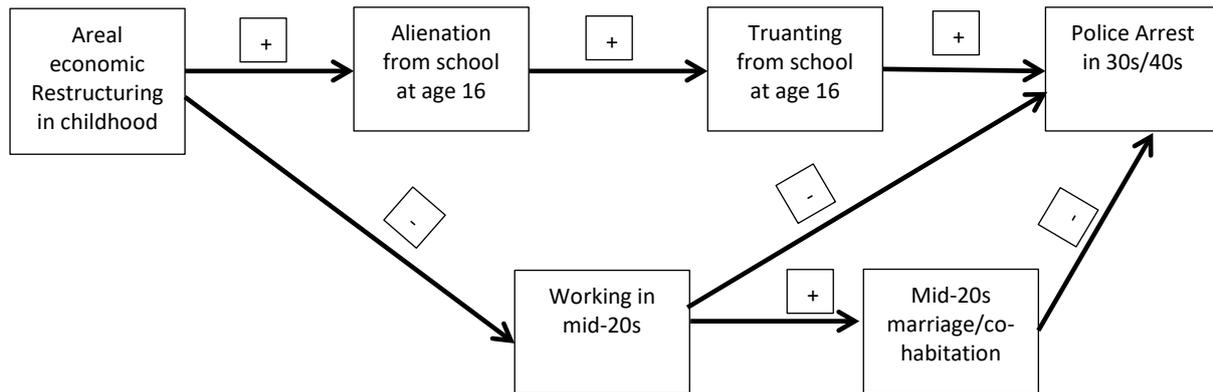
Most accounts of the assumptive world stress the importance of the notions of safety, control and justice in the assumptive world. The assumptive world is terribly mundane; such assumptions lead individuals to the belief that their life has a structure which is ‘knowable’ to themselves and (largely) rewarding and satisfying. The world is understandable, predictable, manageable and largely benign. Alongside these assumptions come the assumptions that oneself is a worthy individual that others care for, and that others are trustworthy. In short, our assumptions about our social worlds make us think that the world is understandable, worth caring about and investing in, and unthreatening to ourselves.

Applying this thinking (derived from sociological structuralism and psychotherapy) to economic restructuring and truancy, we argue that economic restructuring produces a sense of anomie in pupils at school, and serves to motivate truancy, especially if it involves widespread, long-term parental unemployment and the loss of career pathways which would, had they continued to exist, have helped individuals to navigate the transition from school to work, and which (via work) would have provided the basis for independent living, marriage and family formation. Truancy itself is associated with later offending. Drawing upon recent socio-genic theories of desistance (Sampson and Laub, 1993) we also argue that employment and marriage reduce engagement in crime. In this way, our theorising seeks to explain how and why economic restructuring provokes truancy, but avoids falling foul of the tendency to only be able to explain *increases* in rates of offending, a problem which plagued many classical theories of offending (Matza, 1964). We wanted to explore the extent to which national-level social and economic changes may have played a part in truancy amongst those at school in the 1980s. To this end we use the NCDS and the BCS70 to explore the ways in which economic policies shaped schooling experiences for some young children in the 1980s. The NCDS would have completed their education during the 1970s, whilst the BCS70 would have been at school throughout most of the 1980s (and until at least 1986). Our hypothesis is that some of the children in the BCS70 cohort, as they started to think about their lives after school, and started to become increasingly aware of the economic fortunes of their communities and neighbourhoods, may have started to become despondent about both schooling and their abilities to secure a useful role in society and the labour market. This model is presented in diagrammatic form in Figure One.

Our model suggests that area level economic restructuring and the widespread loss of jobs amongst (especially during the 1980s) men working in heavy industry and mining in the UK will signal to children in the areas affected (even if they are not the children of miners, steel-workers, railway employees and those in allied trades) that the assumptive world which they had thought was there, has gone forever. This may lead some of these children to become alienated from school by their mid-teens, and hence to start to truant from school. Truancy as the literature reviewed above makes

clear, will be associated with contact with the criminal justice system into adulthood. However, whilst area-level economic restructuring will reduce the chances of being in employment in one's mid-20s, for those who are fortunate enough to secure work, this employment will be associated with marriage/co-habitation. Both employment in the mid-20s and marriage/cohabitation will reduce the chances of being in contact with the criminal justice system in later life.

**FIGURE ONE: THEORETICAL MODEL OF ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING AND TRUANTING**



*Exploring and testing this model empirically*

Area level economic restructuring was measured by summing two variables from the UK censuses. These were the proportion of the economically active population employed in coal mining in each county and the proportion of economically active males who were unemployed in that same area at the subsequent census. We were unable to simply use the proportion of the economically active working-age population employed in mining in later censuses because by the 1981 census coal mining was aggregated with other primary industries, such as energy and water, so it was not comparable after this date. Counties were based on 1974-1996 counties, and censuses for 1961 and 1971 were geocoded from smaller areas to these same counties. Error in this geocoding was estimated to be less and 5%. Figures 2 and 3 show our area level economic restructuring measure for the years 1961-1971 and 1971-81 respectively.<sup>3</sup> In our modelling, *Disadvantaged Area (1961-1971)* is our measure of area economic restructuring for the area in which the NCDS cohort member was living in 1974. Similarly, *Disadvantaged Area (1971-1981)* is our measure of areal economic restructuring for the area in which the BCS70 cohort member was living in 1986. We choose data for those working in coal mining in 1961 and 1971 as these are a good barometer of industrial strength in the UK, whilst unemployment rates in the same area ten years later is a good measure of loss of such work. As such, the proportion of people working in coal mining is used as a proxy for employment in other heavy industries, since coal mining was frequently co-located with steel production and processing in South Wales, South Yorkshire, Central Belt Scotland and Teeside, and ship-building (in and around Glasgow in particular), and the maintenance of locomotives and railway distribution in centres in Derby, Doncaster, Nottingham, Sheffield, York, and Central Belt Scotland.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Further details on the development and use of this variable can be provided by the authors on request.

<sup>4</sup> There were major railway marshalling yards, for example, at Toton and Colwick (both near Nottingham, Nottinghamshire), Bescot (Birmingham, West Midlands), Tees (Middlesborough, Teeside), Mossend (North

In 1960 there were approximately 607,000 people (mainly men) working in 698 UK mines, whilst in 1970 these figures had reduced to 290,000 people working in 293 mines.<sup>5</sup> Thus our composite measure records for each county, a combined score composed of the following:

- a) the proportion of people in each county who were employed in mining in 1961 (or 1971 for the 1971-1981 analyses), and
- b) the proportion of economically active male employees (traditionally the 'breadwinner' in working class households at that time) who were unemployed in 1971 (or 1981 for the 1971-1981 analyses).

These variables therefore measure change in local employment patterns, tracking shifts in the rapid loss of male employment in mining (and related) industries at two points of time. Whilst there were other social changes which took place alongside these processes, such as the greater inclusion of females in the labour market, for many individual households these developments were in part a response to the loss of traditional forms of (male) employment. Many such communities lived and worked closely together such that local state housing estates ('council houses') were dominated by families who derived their household incomes from the same employer (or interdependent employers), meaning that when coal production declined or ceased altogether in one community, so the livelihoods of whole estates were impacted upon. In order for readers to 'locate' the parts of Britain most heavily affected by the economic changes between 1961-1971 and 1971-1981, Figure 2 provides a map of Britain which shows the levels of areal economic disadvantage using this measure plotted by county using the 1961-1971 data. In Figure 2 one sees that the North-East shoulder of England stands out as an area with which experienced economic disadvantage between 1961 and 1971. Three other areas (also marked with a rectangle) are also worth a mention. These are Central Belt Scotland, Central England, and the South Wales Valleys. Figure 3 repeats this using data for 1971 and 1981. What one sees first is that there is a lot of economic disadvantage generally (especially outside of South-East England). Again, the same four areas stand out as having experienced higher levels of disadvantage. Second, however, these areas are also slightly 'larger' in terms of their geographical coverage (especially Central Belt Scotland, the North-East shoulder of England and Central England – which now forms a 'belt' of disadvantage running from the Mersey in the west to the Humber in the east).

For the 1958 cohort, the census data used were the 1961 and 1971 census (so when the cohort members were aged 3 and 13). This meant that the measure of economic restructuring used for the 1958 cohort captured processes of change, from an industrially-based local economy (using the 1961 census data) to one in which there was a degree of male unemployment ten years later (using data from the 1971 census) whilst the 1958 cohort were in their formative years. This, when repeated for the 1970 cohort, used the proportion of people working in mining in the local area in 1971 summed

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Lanarkshire, Scotland), York (North Yorkshire), Healy Mills (West Yorkshire), Tyne (Newcastle, Tyne and Wear), Port Talbot and Severn Tunnel (both in South Wales), Doncaster (South Yorkshire), Crewe and Warrington (both Cheshire), Carlisle (Cumbria), and in both Tinsley and Wath (near Sheffield, South Yorkshire). There were large locomotive production, repair and maintenance works in Doncaster (South Yorkshire), Crewe (Cheshire), York (North Yorkshire), Derby (Derbyshire), Stratford (East London) and Glasgow (Scotland). The UK car manufacturing was centred on the West Midlands. Steel production was centred in South Wales, Central Belt Scotland, Teeside, Sheffield and (albeit to a lesser degree) Corby (Northamptonshire).

<sup>5</sup> Our data comes from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/historical-coal-data-coal-production-availability-and-consumption-1853-to-2011>. Last accessed January 2019.

with the proportion of economically active males who were unemployed in that same area in 1981 (when the cohort was aged 1 and 11 – again during their formative years).

[FIGURE 2]

[FIGURE 3]

### *Operationalising the model*

*School Alienation*: Both the NCDS and BCS70 cohort members were asked a series of questions about the feelings towards school when aged 16 (in 1974 and 1986 respectively). Both cohorts were asked how much the following statements were true for them: *I feel school is largely a waste of time; I am quiet in the classroom and get on with my work; I think homework is a bore; I find it difficult to keep my mind on my work; I never take work seriously; I don't like school; I think there is no point in planning for the future – you should take things as they come, and, finally; I am always willing to help the teacher*. When factor analysed (separately for each cohort) these items produced one factor, which we use as our measure of school alienation at age 16. Higher scores on these measures mean that the respondent was *more* alienated. (See Appendix for factor loadings etc. for both cohorts).

*Truancy* was asked about in 2000, when the NCDS were aged 42 and the BCS70 were aged 30. We use this data as it was consistently worded in both surveys, and because most other analyses on these data sets have relied on the data collected at this sweep. Respondents were asked *Thinking back to when you were at school, did you ever play truant, that is, stay away from school when you should have been there?* (The codes offered were those shown in Tables 3 and 6 above).

Contact with the criminal justice system (labelled *Offending* in Figures 4 and 5): Again, the same questions were asked of both cohorts in 2000. Herein we rely on two questions combined so as to produce a continuous measure. The first question was worded *Have you ever been arrested by a policer officer and taken to a police station since [previous interview]*. If respondents said that they had been arrested, they were then asked *How many times has this happened?* Thus respondents who had not been arrested were coded 0, whilst those who had been arrested were coded with the number of times they had been arrested. Employment in early adulthood (*Employed*) was recorded at age 23 for the NCDS in 1981, and at age 26 for the BCS70 in 1996 (we use derived variables for both cohorts). Marriage/co-habitation (*Living w/partner*) was asked about at age 23 for the NCDS (1981), when respondents were asked who they lived with (we treated this as a binary with those living alone as one group, and those living as married or actually married as the other). At age 26/1996 the BCS70 were asked: *Which of these best describes your current living situation?* with the codes offered being *living with your husband or wife; living as a couple with someone; living alone or in some other arrangement*. We used the first of these two codes as the measure cohabitation, and the third as indicating non-cohabitation.

### *Results*

We begin by examining the model for the NCDS cohort (Figure 4). (The standard coefficients are listed on the path lines between the variables; bolder lines indicate statistical significance of  $p < .05$ ). The model finds that living in an area which was experiencing economic restructuring between 1961 and 1971 was associated with higher levels of school alienation ( $p < .000$ ). However, areal

economic disadvantage was not statistically significantly associated with truancy at school or offending whilst aged 16-42. Areal economic disadvantage was associated with employment at 23, such that those people living in areas which had experienced economic restructuring between 1961 and 1971 were less likely to be employed in 1981. School alienation is, as one might imagine, strongly related to truancy ( $p < .000$ ), which in turn is strongly related to offending ( $p < .000$ ). Being in work at age 23 in 1981 was strongly related to cohabitation at age 23 ( $p < .000$ ). Of these two variables, only being in work was statistically significantly related to offending, such that those in work were less likely to have been arrested ( $p < .000$ ). Overall, the model explained only 3% of the variance in *Offending*. The fit of the model with the data was reasonable, but below the standard measures of acceptability; the CFI was .829 (ideally one would want this above .9). The RMSEA was at a much more satisfactory level (of .048, ordinarily one wants this to be below .08, and ideally below .05). So, overall the data analyses suggest that the data fits the model moderately well, but that the economic restructuring thesis is not well supported in that the model only explains 3% of offending, and the CFI is lower than is ideal. In short, economic restructuring between 1961 and 1971 did not appear to be related to either truancy in 1974 or offending between 1974 and 2000.

[FIGURE 4]

[FIGURE 5]

Turning now to the BCS70 data (see Figure 5), we find stronger relationships between the variables (again, the standard coefficients are listed on the path lines between the variables) than was the case for the NCDS model. All but one of the paths (that between cohabiting and offending) were statistically significant. The CFI was acceptable (at .906, one wants this to be above .9, recall), and the RMSEA was .041. Overall, the model fit statistics suggest that the data 'fits' the model well, and that area level economic disadvantage thesis is appropriate to measure within the given framework. The model explains 11% of *Offending*. In short, economic restructuring between 1971 and 1981 *does* appear to be related to both truancy in 1986 and offending between 1986 and 2000. Interestingly, the paths between *School Alienation* and *Truancy*, and between *Truancy* and *Offending* are larger for the BCS70 model than they were for the NCDS model, suggesting that these relationships have become stronger overtime. Although being employed was negatively associated with offending for both cohorts, this again becomes stronger for the BCS70, suggesting that the relationship between employment and offending has grown stronger and that being out of work is more associated with offending than it used to be. Drawing upon recent theories of desistance, we found that employment in the mid-20s reduced engagement in crime. However, being in employment itself was strongly (and negatively) related to area level experiences of economic restructuring; those individuals who were living in areas which had experienced greater levels of this when they were in their teenage years were less likely to be working in their mid-20s. This is suggestive of a continued differential impact of wider economic restructuring. For the BCS70 cohort, being in employment in their mid-20s was much more strongly associated with lower levels of engagement in crime than it was for the NCDS, suggesting that the role of employment as a route out of crime is contingent on historical period.

## Discussion

Let us start by discussing the limitations of our study. Because the data sets we employ did not collect any qualitative data, we are unable to assess the meaning of truancy for the children themselves. However, Willis' and Carlen et al.'s studies (1977 and 1992 respectively) suggest that

boredom, and a sense of hopelessness or pointlessness were a motivating factor in truancy. The items used to measure *School Alienation*, and which were strongly associated with truancy speak to these same feelings. The strengths of our paper, on the other hand, are the use of national-level data sets of the highest quality from two highly respected studies, and which enable us to examine the unfolding of differential regional impacts of economic restructuring on school attendance. Furthermore, the two cohorts we have studied (as opposed to the more commonly used uni-cohort studies which are often drawn from one town or city, and as such do not permit analyses of regional differences) are both national samples (as opposed to more locally-based samples), and number cases in the thousands (rather than hundreds).

Using two birth cohort studies we have demonstrated that radical economic restructuring in the UK during the 1980s (which resulted in high levels of regional unemployment and the destruction of key industries) affected those who were growing up at the time. The BCS70 cohort were more likely than the cohort who grew up ahead of them to disengage with school and become alienated from education. The long-term impact of their experiences was an increase in adult offending. Although it is not simple to locate and incorporate suitable area-level measures into statistical analyses of this kind, our exploration suggests there is considerable potential and meaning in doing so. We found that, alongside other individual characteristics, the socio-economic conditions in which the children were raised, could have a long reach over their engagement in crime as adults. The example described here demonstrates the value of criminologists fostering ever-closer links with political and economic history.

From our perspective, the value of this analysis is not simply about expanding our appreciation of the 'wider contexts'. Instead, we argue that political and economic conditions are fundamental to understanding why and how people offend. Despite the undoubted quality of the research into criminal careers in general, and as it pertains to the relationship between schooling and offending, it remains the case that much of the quantitative research has tended to tackle the causal processes of offending in a largely individualised manner. This ranges from a near-total emphasis on individual-level processes (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990), to individual-institutional interactions (Merton, 1938; Hirschi, 1969) to more ecological models (Shaw and McKay, 1942). This observation has led Robert Sampson to note that society and the idea of social change was one of the key elements which was missing from current research into criminal careers (2015:278-9). Similar observations about life-course research have been made by those working outside of criminology. For example, Mayer noted that the "unravelling of the impacts of institutional contexts and social processes ... on life-courses has hardly begun" (2009:426), adding 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."

Thus, whilst life-course criminology, we would argue, has focused on what one might call 'proximate institutions' (families, schools, employers and communities most obviously), those institutional arrangements and the discourses and policies which surround and flow from more distal institutions and the ideas they promulgate (political parties, governance structures, discourses about schooling and 'truants', ideological stances on education, economic policies and the thinking underpinning the funding of social services which support communities) have not received very much attention at all. In short, the current approaches adopted by life-course criminologists tend to encourage the construction of 'the offender' in individualistic terms – and this it would appear extends to research into truancy and offending. The influence of the wider policy agenda has been overlooked.

Our paper started with a critique of current approaches to truancy and offending – which share much in common (in terms of their behaviouralist thinking and measurement) with criminal careers research. We argued that the current thinking has tended to ignore the structural drivers of truancy (and indeed, *changes* in these structural conditions) and in so doing have focused thinking and policy initiatives at the individual level. This has the unfortunate side-effect of pathologising the individuals (and their families) and focusing on attributes of the school staff at the expense of a wider and, we feel, more nuanced understanding of the drivers of truancy. Our study, it ought to be acknowledged, still finds a relationship between truancy and offending, but, moreover, it finds that the role of structural level variables (here economic restructuring over a 10-year period) is a more powerful predictor of truancy during periods of dramatic economic change. As such, the causal relationship is strong, *and* variant. In other words, when economies shift from (in this case) an industrial base to a post-industrial base, so we find stronger relationships between economic change and truancy and offending. This means that the processes associated with truancy and offending, whilst at the individual level may appear to be invariant over time, may themselves be associated with changes at the structural level which are far less invariant, and, at least in the period we have examined, due to government economic policies. This returns us to the point, above, made by Mayer (2009); almost all of the previous assessments of the ‘school-to-prison-pipeline’ have relied upon *one* cohort of school-children. Our approach of combining two strategically-related samples has enabled us to explore how wider social and economic structures shape individual life-courses with regards to schooling, and how relationships between key variables can emerge or strengthen over time. This has important ramifications for those studying and theorising both life-courses and criminal careers since many existing studies do not permit an examination of the role of changing structures, and in so doing may be overlooking important components needed to explain key individual-level processes and outcomes.

## APPENDIX

### Factor Loadings, KMO and Eigenvalue for Each Cohort’s *School Alienation* Score

Item	NCDS	BCS70
Waste of time	.654	.635
Quiet in class	-.760	-.419
Homework a bore	.551	.585
Concentrate at school	.449	.546
Take work seriously	.589	.660
Don’t like school	.699	.678
No point planning	.340	.404
Willing to help	-.345	-.427
KMO	.831	.847
Eigenvalue	3.051	3.116

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