Exploring the Individual-Level Effects of Thatcherism on Crime Over the Life-Course: Evidence from Strategically-Paired Cohort Studies

Stephen Farrall,
School of Sociology & Social Policy,
University of Nottingham
Criminal Careers Research

• One of the largest areas of research in criminology.
• Huge focus on individual-level and familial/community processes.
• BUT has not really fully grappled with larger, institutional influences on offending careers.
• I will report on our recent work exploring that impact of Thatcherism on offending careers in the UK.
• This demonstrates the roles which macro-level political decisions affecting social and economic policies affected individual life-courses and engagement in crime.
Who was Margaret Thatcher?

• Leader of the Conservative Party 1975-90.
• PM of the UK 1979-90.
• Either “the saviour of the nation”
  OR
  “the Devil incarnate”
  depending on your political beliefs!
Thatcherism - just one example of the 1980s ‘New Right’

UK: ‘Thatcherism’ (1979-1990 – since?).
Australia: Fraser (75-83) and Hawke (83-89).
Canada: Mulroney (84-93).
USA: ‘Reaganomics’ (1981-89 – since?)
(Roger Douglas and Ruth Richardson).
What did 1980s New Right (aka Neo-Liberalism) entail?

Cuts to govt’ expenditure. Anti-Post War Consensus/Welfare State.

**Economy** (reductions in taxes, accepting unemployment, deregulation, privatisation of state assets, economic restructuring, rises in inequality).

**Social security** (cut, de-indexed, reduced eligibility, discourse around dole cheats, workfare programmes).

**Housing** (state-owned housing sold to tenants; unequal spatial distribution of sales and of styles of housing).
Analytic Approach: Pairing Cohorts over time

Individual-level analyses:
• Two longitudinal cohorts of people born in the UK.
• The oldest born in 1958 (n = 18k), and the younger born in 1970 (n = 17k).
• Interviews with parents, teachers, cohort members themselves.
• Interviews from birth into adult life.

• See Farrall, Gray and Jones (*Criminology & Criminal Justice*, forthcoming) for full outline of our analytic approach.
The Individual-Level Data sets: ‘paired’ prospective longitudinal studies

Two birth cohorts of people born in the UK

• One group born in March 1958 (so now 60). NCDS. N = 17,733
• One group born in April 1970 (so now 48). BCS70. N = 16,135

National samples. Every child born 1 week in March 1958/April 1970. Interviews every 4-10 years. Interviews with cohort members, parents, teachers, their children.
The Individual-Level Data sets: ‘paired’ prospective longitudinal studies


We treat this cohort as a pre-Thatcher cohort, as they had reached something like adulthood during the 1980s. This is NOT to say that they were unaffected by the period, however.


We treat this cohort as ‘Thatcher’s Children’. Life-courses altered for some as a result of the social and economic changes of the 1980s their legacy effects.
The Temporal Impact of Ideas and Policies on Life-Courses

- Political Ideas
- Legislative and Policy Programme
  - Policies X and Y affect Cohort A and B at different points in their life courses.

Birth Cohort A
- Compared to Cohort A, Cohort B has more members involved in offending and those who offend, offend for longer.

Birth Cohort B

If the political ideas can be shown to have shaped the policies, and if the policies can explain the changes in offending profiles, this can be used to establish a differentiated legacy effect of political ideologies on life courses (via policy enactment/operation).
Housing: Individual-Level Affects

• National-picture (Farrall et al, *BJC* 2016) finds more crime in council housing estates than in privately owned housing. Due to rising unemployment and increases in economic inequality.  

• Individual-level analyses (Farrall et al, *Geoforum* 2019):

• Research Questions:
  
a: Does *parental* tenure trajectory affect their children’s chances of being homeless, and coming in contact with the UK criminal justice system?

b: Did this change between cohorts?

NCDS and BCS70
Summarising the NCDS Parental Tenure, Homelessness and Crime Outcomes

- Parental Tenure
- Homelessness
- Other –ve outcomes
- CJS Contact
- Violent Victimisat’n

NS

***

**

***

NS
Headline News for 1958 Births

• Homelessness IS related to:
  • negative life outcomes,
  • contact with the criminal justice system and
  • violent victimisation.

• BUT parental tenure trajectory is NOT related to homelessness.

• (So it didn’t matter for your offending career if your parents bought their council house or not IF you were born in 1958).
Summarising the BCS70 Parental Tenure, Homelessness and Crime Outcomes

Parental Tenure

Homelessness

Other –ve outcomes

CJS Contact

Violent Victimisation

NS

***

***

**

***

***
Summarising the BCS70 Parental Tenure, Homelessness and Crime Outcomes

Parental Tenure → Homelessness

Homelessness → Other –ve outcomes

Homelessness → CJS Contact

Homelessness → Violent Victimisat’n

NS

Other –ve outcomes

CJS Contact

Violent Victimisat’n

**

***

NS
Headline News for 1970 Births

• SO parental tenure trajectory IS related to homelessness for those born in 1970.

• ... and, again, homeless IS related to:
  • negative life outcomes,
  • contact with the criminal justice system and
  • violent victimisation.

• (So parental tenure trajectory and historical era interact).
Economic Restructuring and Truancy and Offending at the Individual Level

• In Farrall, Gray and Jones (BJC 2020a) we explored economic restructuring at the county-level and individual children’s truancy from school and offending.

• Again, using both the 1958/NCDS and BCS1970 Cohorts.
Which Areas Were Most Effected by Economic Restructuring?

(Darker = greater change).

Four Red Circles
Central Belt Scotland,
NE Shoulder,
Central Belt England & S Wales.
Economic Restructuring and Schooling (1958 Cohort)
Economic Restructuring and Schooling (1958 Cohort)

But the model is poorly fitting.
Economic Restructuring and Schooling (1970 Cohort)

This model has an acceptable fit to the data.
Economic Restructuring and Offending at the Individual Level

• More recently (Farrall, Gray and Jones, *Politics & Society* 2020b) we have explored individual people’s criminal careers, and the relationship of this to economic restructuring.

• 1970 Cohort only (insufficiently similar data in 1958 cohort for meaningful replications).
Path Diagram of Offending (w/o economic restructuring)

SMC = 27% RMSEA = .011 CFI = .969 bold = statistically significant paths.
Path Diagram of Econ Restructuring and Offending

SMC = 27% RMSEA = .012 CFI = .955 bold = statistically significant paths.
Path Diagram of Econ Restructuring and Offending

Economic Change (1971-1981)

Disciplined At School (16, 1986)

School Alienation (16, 1986)

Quality of Relationship w/ Parents (15, 1986)

On 'At Risk' Regressor (12, 1986)

Offending (16, 1986)

Employmnt (36, 1996)

Offending (36, 2000)

SMC = 27% RMSEA = .012 CFI = .955 bold = statistically significant paths.
Economic Restructuring and Offending at the Individual Level

• When we repeated this for the four areas of economic restructuring shown earlier ... (again in Farrall, Gray and Jones, Politics & Society 2020b) ...
Which Areas Were Most Effected by Economic Restructuring?

(Darker = greater change).

Four Red Circles
Central Belt Scotland, NE Shoulder, Central Belt England & S Wales.
Economic Restructuring and Offending at the Individual Level

• We found that the model changed (in terms of the SMC) by degree of economic restructuring.

Lowest level: .15  (think Hampshire and Surrey)
Next Lowest: .20  (think Kent and London)
Next highest: .18  (think Lancashire and Derbyshire)
Highest level: .47  (think S Yorks, Nottinghamshire)
Overall SMC: .27

So, the model varies spatially.
Implications for Criminal Careers Research

• We probably need to move away from the focus on individual-level and familial/community processes and start to theorising larger, macro-level, institutional influences on offending careers. e.g. Neil and Sampson, AJS 2021.

• We found both temporal and spatial variations (between cohorts and degrees of economic restructuring by county).

• Our work on Thatcherism suggests impacts; macro-level political decisions affecting social and economic policies affected individual life-courses and engagement in crime (see also Gray et al BJC 2022 and Jones et al EJC 2022).

• But was Thatcherism/1980s an outlier?

• Are radical social and economic policies more likely to produce detectable impacts than slow change/evolving reformulation of policies (Farrall, Hay and Gray, Exploring Political Legacies 2020c)?


