**Politics, Research Design, and the ‘Architecture’ of Criminal Careers Studies**

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**Abstract**

*Criminal careers research is one of the bedrocks – if not the bedrock – of criminology. It remains a key focal point of criminological research, and has embraced ideas and theorising from sociology, psychology, psychiatry and urban and community studies. Despite the widening of the landscape of what might be termed ‘the criminological enterprise’ (to include victimology, prisons research, punishment, deterrence, and environmental criminology), criminal careers (now differentiated into studies of onset, persistence and desistance) remains a key plank of criminology. This article critiques the research design of longitudinal studies of criminal careers, arguing that a key explanatory factor has been consistently overlooked in criminal careers research, due, in part, to the research design of such studies. In focussing on the role of politically-motivated changes to economic policies and the re-structuring of the industrial base this produced, I empirically relate individual offending careers to politics in way very few have done before. The article touches upon a series of suggestions for how empirical studies of criminal careers might be improved.*

Keywords: Criminal careers; political processes; offending; research design; missing variables.

**Introduction**

This article seeks, by way of critique, to reinvigorate the study of criminal careers by incorporating within its epistemological framework a wider and deeper understanding of political and historical processes, and how these can shape and modify both individuals’ life-courses and engagement in crime. This goal (of incorporating into criminal careers research a better understanding of the role of wider contexts) has recently started to be recognised as being absent from our debates and empirical studies. For example, Robert Sampson noted that the idea of social change was one of the key elements which was missing from current research into criminal careers (2015:278-9). Similarly, the German sociologist, Karl Ulrich 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 *empirically-grounded* life-course criminology has focused on what one might call ‘proximal institutions’ (families, schools, employers and communities most obviously), those more distal institutional, structural arrangements, and the discourses and policies which surround and flow from them (discourses about the family, ideological stances on education, economic policies and the thinking underpinning the funding of social services which support communities, for example) have not received very much attention. Following a review of criminal careers research, and a discussion of some of the existing critiques of this body of work, this article moves on to a discussion of one recent empirical study of wider political, economic and social-structural processes and their impact on criminal careers. Taken together, the publications stemming from this project empirically demonstrate the utility of incorporating an appreciation of macro-level processes in explaining individual-level processes and outcomes. I conclude by reflecting on why, when compared with individual- or community-level variables, macro-level processes may be much less common in empirical studies of criminal careers. I end by suggesting a way forward for future research aimed at uncovering the role of social structures (etc.) on offending trajectories. In short, this article seeks to make the case for a new, more thoroughly contextualised research design for future criminal careers studies.

**Introducing Criminal Careers Research**

A recent search of the Web of Science database for the term ‘criminal career’ in either the title or the topic of published scientific articles revealed that between the 1930s and 2017 some 1,244 articles on this topic had been published. Scopus lists some 1,717 between 1924 and 2017. According to Web of Science, in 1980 there were 15 publications that year; twenty years later some 26 in 2000; by 2010 this was 63, and for almost each year since, we have seen year-on-year increases. In 2016 some 101 articles were published; in 2017 it was 95. Between them, these articles have been cited some 45,162 times during this same period. Such analyses exclude, of course, book length contributions, some of which have won international prizes and their authors given prestigious awards (such as books Robert Sampson and John Laub, Shadd Maruna, David Farrington, John Hagan, and P-O Wikstrom to name but five). Recently, the field has fragmented somewhat into studies of why people cease offending, intergenerational transmission, and offending specialisation, with specific studies of these being conducted. Criminologists who have focused on criminal careers research have served their communities well, with many acting as Presidents of national learned bodies, such as Farrington, Sampson, Agnew, Petersilia, McCord, Hirschi and Laub. It is hard, truth be told, to imagine a criminology which did not *at some level* explore the lives and life-courses of those who offend.

This scholarship has additionally developed some of the key ‘facts’ in criminology (which, amongst other social sciences, does not have very many facts to which it can readily point). The idea of the age-crime curve and the overlap between victims and offenders are two such criminological facts. Aside from the fact that females commit far less crime then males do, it is hard to find very many other irrefutable, law-like observations in criminology. Accordingly, this body of work has also seen debates over the ways in which criminal careers research ought to be conducted, such as the ‘true value’ of Lambda disputes of the 1980s (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1986, Blumstein et al, 1988). Some of the recent ‘hot topics’ in criminology (such as desistance from crime) owe much to criminal careers research (e.g. Sampson and Laub, 1993) from which they are a ‘spin-off’. And, finally, the body of work on criminal careers has contributed to various policy initiatives within the criminal justice system (not least of all from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime, McAra and McVie, 2010). These policy contributions further include the idea of selective incapacitation, and various reconviction prediction tools used on a daily basis by probation officers in many countries (Copas and Marshall, 1998). Around the same time that such prediction tools were being developed, the identification of factors associated with the risk of offending started to feed into practice. Such factors were often deficiencies which were individualised in such a way as to pathologise those concerned (that is, the challenges which the individuals concerned and their families faced were presented as if they were unrelated to wider social or economic contexts, Carlen et al 1992). More recently work aimed at encouraging the adoption of the desistance perspective has made some headway in practice (McNeill et al 2012). In short, criminal careers research has been a major source of insight within criminology since its inception, and criminal careers researchers have, collectively, done much to develop and promote both their theorising and the policy implications of their research.

On the basis of the above, one might imagine that this large and sturdy body of work, now advanced to a very mature state, is beyond major transformation. Its methodologies (repeated interviews with people, either selected outwith (e.g. Farrington, et al 1986) or recruited from within the criminal justice system (e.g. Zamble and Quinsey, 1997), or ‘one-off’ retrospective interviews with active or former offenders (e.g. Maruna, 2001)) are well-established and, if not without problems, sufficiently robust to withstand most reasonable critiques. Yet, the aim of this article is to argue that criminal careers research *has* inadvertently over-looked a crucial set of variables which, when examined together, suggest some major flaws in the evidence base of such research, and hence of the theories and policy implications which stem from them. This article proceeds as follows: in the next section the variables which are commonly used in criminal careers are briefly reviewed. This, of course, touches upon some of the key concepts in this body of work. After that, I examine the idea that the reasons why some people start to offend (and hence may continue to offend) may be related to changes in macro-level political, social and economic factors – a group of variables with which criminal careers research has not properly grappled. Having examined the few studies which do hint at the possibility that offending careers might be related to macro-processes, I hone in on one recent research project which has explored the role of macro-level economic and social processes (largely politically-driven in the exemplar studied). I review what this project can tell us both about the macro-level processes that can influence individual offending careers, and about the research design of criminal careers research and why this may have (inadvertently) led researchers away from a full exploration of the role of politics in offending careers.

**Criminal Careers Research: Key Variables Employed**

Criminal careers research has explored, amongst other variables: age (hence the finding that there is an age-crime curve); gender (hence the finding that females, generally, commit far-fewer crimes than males); ethnicity (finding that some ethnicities may commit more crimes than others); prior criminal history (finding that previous convictions are a good predictor of future offending and convictions, both in general and with regards to offence type, and hence the idea of offence ‘specialisation’); motivation (finding that those more motivated to give up offending are more likely to do so); bio-social processes; peers (finding that who one hangs out with is a good predictor of engagement in crime, and, more recently that a peer group can support each other in processes of desistance, Weaver, 2017); drugs (finding that engagement in drug misuse is a major contributor to offending careers); alcohol (very similar to the relationship with drugs); religion (finding that religious belief can inhibit offending, or in some cases can assist desistance from crime); attachment (finding that those with weak attachments to others are most likely to offend); beliefs (finding that those who do not share the commonly-held views on the wrongfulness of crime are most likely to engage in offending); social control (finding that low levels of both informal and formal social controls - such as parents, schools, peers, and the police - shape engagement in crime; self-control and impulsivity (those with lower levels of control or higher levels of impulsivity tend to commit more crime); physique and testosterone (those males with greater physical prowess and elevated levels of testosterone tend to commit more crime); intelligence (those with lower IQ scores tend to commit more crime); parental offending history (which is associated with off-spring offending); parental supervision styles (some are associated with greater rates of offending); truancy and school attainment (which are positively associated with offending); family size (larger families tend to produce more delinquent children); marriage and employment (which both tend to be associated with reductions in offending); employment instability (which is associated with greater rates of offending), and various personality factors.[[1]](#footnote-1)

However, whilst it has been noted that relative inequality can drive some people towards crime (either out of envy of what they cannot legitimately gain for themselves, such as in Merton’s 1938 theorising) or out of necessity (see Carlen, 1996 on survivalism), the role of *macro-level* economic processes as a direct cause of the onset of offending has not featured widely in *individual-level* criminal career research. However, time series analyses often find strong associations between macro-level economic indicators (such as unemployment rates, levels of economic inequality, or consumer confidence) and crime (especially, but not solely, property crime, see Jennings et al 2012). Whilst these findings have intermittently been replicated at the individual-level (Farrington et al 1986), it nevertheless remains the case that very few studies of longitudinal criminal careers have explored in-depth the role of macro-level processes (such as social or economic change) on individual criminal careers. Those studies which *have* explored macro-level processes (e.g. Payne and Piquero, 2020, Shen et al 2020) have tended to rely on officially-recorded data (relating either to arrests, convictions or imprisonment), rather than self-report data, which is generally considered to be at least as reliable (if collected contemporaneously), and which contains data beyond basic socio-demographic variables such as age, and gender. For example, in comparing why five age cohorts of North Carolinians experienced different rates of incarceration, Shen et al (2020) rely on officially-recorded data. Similarly, Greenberg employed officially-recorded data in his analysis of the changes in arrest rates between 1970 and 1980 (1985), and recorded crime rates in a further article (1994) exploring cohort-related changes in offending between 1952 and 1987. Whilst the reliance on official data is defensible if one is examining sentencing, for example, such articles, as illuminating as they are, a) cannot explore the role of subjective experiences of the respondents (such as their feelings about their schooling, or the state of their marriage and so on), which represent alternative explanations of their offending,[[2]](#footnote-2) and b) are weaken by the reliance on data which are subject to biases in routine criminal justice system operating and recording practices.

**Looking Beyond Individual-Level Variables: Enter Political and Economic Factors**

Despite the general sparsity of studies exploring political and economic factors, there have been some efforts to inject an understanding of the role of political processes into criminal careers research. These have been mainly (although not exclusively) theoretical in nature or based on ‘reading across’ a number of different studies in order to argue that political, economic and/or social change has influenced criminal careers. John Hagan (1997) adopts the latter approach in his review of the social and economic changes experienced by the USA from (roughly) the 1950s until the mid-1990s. He notes that during this period (and especially during the 1980s) the USA has 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” (all quotes are from p289). These processes, coupled with the concentration of poverty, meant that many US cities found that their social structures were transformed radically. He cites Wacquant and Wilson’s observation that laissez-faire (i.e. ‘free market’, ‘neo-liberal’ or ‘Reaganomic’) governmental policies helped to exacerbate the situation (p290). Foreshadowing Jock Young’s observation that

“It is not the ‘Thin Blue Line’, but the social bricks and mortar of civil society which are the major bulwarks against crime. Good jobs with a discernible future, housing estates that tenants can be proud of, community facilities which enhance a sense of cohesion and belonging, a reduction in unfair income inequalities, all create a society which is more cohesive and less criminogenic.” (1992:45),

Hagan argues that

“…a social context that includes poor schools, inadequate job information networks, and a lack of legitimate employment opportunities not only gives rise to weak labor force attachment, but increases the probability that individuals will be constrained to seek income derived from illegal and deviant activities.” (1997:290).

Via such processes, argues Hagan, individuals become embedded in criminality; a lack of decent employment makes successfully navigating the transition to a law-abiding adulthood all the harder, and especially so if one has already had some contact with the police and no or limited educational qualifications. Similar points are taken up by Farrall et al (2010) in their assessment of the changes which the UK has experienced since the early-1980s. They point to changes in the sorts of legitimate employment available, the rise of the ‘knowledge economy’, the increased use of pre-employment criminal record checks and highlight the problems that such trends present for young working- or lower-class males (who may not be able to easily gain places to study at colleges and universities, thereby locking them out of the ‘knowledge economy’), and those wishing to cease offending. Such contributions might be disregarded as ‘voices off’ were it not for the fact that Hagan’s chapter is in an edited collection of developmental theories of crime and delinquency (edited by Terrence Thornberry and including contributions from Moffitt, Agnew, Sampson and Laub, and le Blanc – all leading scholars in criminal careers research, and the Farrall et al article was part of a special edition of the *European Journal of Criminology* devoted to criminal careers research in Europe.

Another contribution which tackles the macro-logical aspects of criminal careers is that by Benson (2002). Benson, not unlike Hagan, reviews what is known about crime over the life-course and recent changes in US society. He notes how divorce rates increased from the 1960s, along with increases in the age of first marriage for many women, meaning that the family, as an institution, was being challenged. As the number of non-family households rose, so young people were less subject to informal social control (argues Benson, 2002:173), which increased the opportunities for offending (and victimisation). Alongside divorce, Benson notes the rise in out-of-wedlock births, which he interprets as implying that these children are less likely to spend their time living with both parents. Benson also touches on the USA’s ‘war on drugs’ and imprisonment binge, both of which were heavily politicised government policies. The imprisonment binge started in the 1970s. For the period between 1925 and 1970, the US incarceration rate was around 110 per 100,000. In 1972 it had reached 160 per 100,000, and by 1997 stood at 645 per 100,000. Expressed as raw numbers, these figures translate to around 200,000 US citizens in state and federal prisons in 1971, rising more than six-fold to around 1.3 million in 1998. In some US states, the proportionate increases would have been even larger (2002:176). In many cases the increases fell disproportionately on Black or Latino Americans.

Building in part on Hagan’s work, Benson notes how the US economy has shed hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs in the past 40 years. Chicago, for example, lost more than a fifth of its manufacturing jobs between 1980 and 1983 (2002:183), with many of the jobs either going overseas or being lost altogether. Such job losses affected the poorest the most (and especially so young men, where the loss of apprenticeship opportunities and jobs in traditional trades had a major impact), and, in keeping with Hagan’s position, led to increases in residential segregation and polarisation. Benson concludes 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). One (albeit small-scale) study which has made some in-roads into our understanding of the role of wider social structural influences on offending is that by Linnea Osterman (2018). Osterman studied the life-courses and experiences of desistance of 24 women, 12 of whom lived in England, and 12 of whom lived in Sweden. The Swedish women, when compared to the English women, had less onerous routes out of offending, due to the greater investments made by the Swedish state in penal welfarism and assistance with rehabilitation.

One study which has explicitly studied the impact of an increasingly punitive criminal justice system empirically is that by Shen et al 2020. Using data on imprisonment from North Carolina, Shen et al find that the cohort of offenders who reached their peak age of offending during the late-1980s and early-1990s, just as the criminal justice system became more punitive, had a much higher likelihood of incarcerations throughout the *remainder of their lives* than had previous age cohorts (2020:668). Since sentencing is a state-level matter (rather than a federally-controlled matter), this study shows the ways in which state-level criminal justice policies can affect the life-courses of citizens. Shen et al (2020:668) conclude that

“The crime-punishment wave of the late-1980s and early-1990s … contributed to a substantial increase in the incarceration of affected cohorts to decades later as they accumulated an extended criminal history and thus elevated chance of a prison sentence in middle and older ages”.

In short, the ways in which politicians controlled sentencing policies could shape the lives of those who came into contact with the criminal justice system, and that punitive turn could still be detected 20 to 30 years downstream.

Such contributions, as key as they are in making a convincing case for the structural influences on those factors which we know to be related to engagement in crime, do not typically demonstrate this with primary empirical evidence, relying instead on ‘reading across’ and re-presenting existing studies. This is a far from ideal situation; the empirical evidence to either support or disprove the claim that structural processes shape the institutions associated with criminal careers has not been irrefutably demonstrated. The next section of this article summarises one recent project which sought to empirically examine the role of political change on society and the experiences of crime (that is, victimisation, fear of crime, attitudes towards punishment, as well as offending).

**Studying Politically-Driven Economic and Social Change: A Recent Exemplar**

Based on a series of awards from the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council, I and a number of colleagues have explored the ways in which the social and economic policies of the UK government from 1979 have changed key social institutions in UK society, which in turn have shaped various experiences of crime. Herein I will focus on our articles which show a relationship between policy change at the national- (or macro-) level, and the behaviour of individuals. Expressed in summary form, my argument is that sudden and radical economic and social change brought about by the election of a ‘New Right’ government in 1979 (led by Margaret Thatcher) led to an increase in young people finding themselves in situations in which engagement in crime was more likely. The project aimed to assess the extent to which national-level path dependencies (the idea that once a society has embarked down one particular developmental route, it is hard to alter course, Pierson 2004:20) were replicated at the individual-level in terms of offending trajectories. Does a nation’s trajectory of development shape and alter the life-courses of those individuals who live within it? If so, how might these processes operate? Who might they affect most (and why?)? In order to accomplish this, we relied upon datasets which have not been analysed terribly much by criminologists, namely the National Child Development Study, and the Birth Cohort Study. (The only other criminologist who has used these datasets appears to have been David Farrington, Murray et al 2010).

*Outlining the Datasets Employed*

Although it is not the intention herein to present new data, it is nevertheless important to outline the datasets on which we relied, since there are various characteristics of them which are key to what we were able to say about the role of wider political, economic and social processes on individual offending careers. 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 about the sample members in 1958 (birth), 1965, 1969, 1974, 1981, 1991, 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2013. 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. Via analyses of these two cohorts (which were sampled in identical fashions and often fielded identical survey questions) we were able to explore the same processes 12 years apart.

Turning now, albeit briefly, to the analyses of these studies themselves, in Farrall et al (2020a) we explored the causes of truancy from school, which of course is a predictor of engagement in crime (Roque et al, 2017). We show that the 1958 cohort (who were at school during the 1960s and 1970s) had *lower* rates of truancy from school than the 1970 cohort. Further, the extent of economic restructuring[[3]](#footnote-3) which the county in which they were living experienced during the period when they were age one to ten years of age did *not* play any part in truancy amongst those born in 1958, or their later offending (although truancy and offending were themselves related). For the 1970 cohort the picture was different. The extent of the economic restructuring experienced by the county in which sample members were living when aged one to ten years *was* related to both their levels of truancy and later offending. We argued that the 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 (such policies were often referred to at the time as ‘laissez faire’ (or monetarism) and are now often referred to as ‘neo-liberalism’). As such, we argued, the early-1980s radical right economic policies harmed an already fragile economy, produced a loss of manufacturing jobs, and an increase in unemployment, which, in turn, increased school alienation and truancy for the 1970 cohort and which further encouraged them into offending. This model was not supported using the equivalent data for the 1958 birth cohort, suggesting that it was the increase in sudden, geographically-clustered economic restructuring experienced by the BCS70 whilst in their formative years which encouraged their truancy from school and hence onset of offending.

Again using this pairing of datasets, we also explored the impact of another of the ‘flagship’ policies of the early Thatcher government, namely that relating to the sale of council housing (Farrall et al 2019). When she came to office in 1979, just under a third of households were rented to the tenants by local governments. At this time, council housing was used by the ‘respectable’ working-class and in some instances sections of the lower middle-class. By selling houses to their tenants and refusing to allow councils to build new ones, the Thatcher government created an increased demand for housing for poorer sections of UK society. Over time, as charted in Farrall et al (2016a), 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). By dividing both the 1958 and 1970 birth 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, we were able to assess the extent to which the decisions of one’s parents were associated with experiences of crime (Farrall et al, 2019).

We found that whether or not an individual’s parents had bought their council house was *not* predictive of homelessness for the 1958 cohort. At this point, those families who bought their council house were amongst the wealthiest of council tenants and fairly few and far between. For the 1970 cohort, the experience was different, however. If the cohort member’s parents did *not* buy their council house, then the cohort member was statistically significantly *more* likely to experience homelessness by the time they were 30 (in 2000) compared to those whose parents either bought their council house or who were living in homes they already owned. At this stage, the welfare state in the UK had started to be whittled away by various changes in legislation (such as the 1986 Social Security Act) and policies (such as the de-indexing of the value of social security payments). Hence we were able to demonstrate that the increased likelihood of experiencing homelessness amongst the children of those who did not buy their council homes (relative to *both* other families contemporaneously *and* an earlier cohort born in 1958) was due to the changes in housing and social security policies enacted by the Conservative governments from 1979 to 1997. Homelessness, we also found, was strongly related to both increased contact with the criminal justice system and victimisation - and especially so for the 1970 cohort. Hence we concluded that social policies indirectly increased both victimisation and engagement in crime for the latter cohort.

Finally, a further article (Farrall et al 2020b) explored the extent to which economic restructuring at the regional-level ten years prior to the birth of the 1970 cohort was associated with those variables which are viewed as amongst the ‘drivers’ to offending (such as school-related and familial processes, engagement in the labour market, and marriage). Once again we found that economic restructuring was related to all of these processes, and that this varied according to the *degree* of restructuring experienced at the regional-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. Social institutions appeared 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.

*Summary*

What our studies suggest is that socio-economic structural processes *are* implicated in the onset (and maintenance) of criminal careers. We showed that as socio-economic structures change, so they mediate engagement in offending. Furthermore, this varied in two ways. The first form of structural variance relates to the temporal dimension. Temporal structural variance suggests that the influence of structural variables at *t1* may not be the same as those at *t2*. As such, ‘constant cause’ thinking (that is, the assumption that a cause must work in the same manner at *all* times, Levitsky and Way, 2015:97), if it becomes too readily established, could lead to the discounting of several otherwise plausible hypotheses as contextual effects would have been ignored. In other words, variables and the relationships between them are mediated by historical context(s), as shown by Greenberg, 1985, 1994, Shen et al 2020, Payne and Piquero, 2020 and our own studies. Such evidence, in our studies, is to be found in the work undertaken on the causes of truancy and the relationship between parental tenure and homelessness.

The second form of variance is spatial structural variance (or more accurately socio-spatial structural variance). This implies that the processes associated with, in this case offending, vary according to where (as well as when) they take place. Evidence for this is to be found in our article on the structural drivers to offending (Farrall et al 2020b). Here the degree to which an individual is drawn into offending and the reasons for this appear to be a function of the extent of the economic restructuring experienced at the areal level. Hence the finding that in those places in which there was little economic restructuring individual-level variables dominate 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. The above, it ought to be noted, combines both forms of structural variance, since the changes in the economy experienced a) took place over time, and b) differentially affected different communities. 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 agriculture or ‘white collar’ jobs dominated. Further analyses (Jones et al 2021) found that those communities which had relied on heavy industry saw greater increases in new-build prisons when compared to those areas which had not.

In part, what is unique, I think, about the contributions which we have made is that we were able to empirically study at the *individual-level* some of the processes which John Hagan (1997) and Michael Benson (2002) have theorised were taking place at the *structural-level*. This work, therefore, locates criminal careers within a wider framework not simply of socio-economic deprivation, but is able to link this (via a process known in political science as ‘process tracing’ Bennett and Checkel, 2015) back to specific policies which were to varying degrees politically motivated by key social actors. Process tracing consists of the analysis of a case (or cases) in a temporally-ordered sequence of events and processes such that the causal relationships between them are illuminated. The analyst is interested in the goals and actions of individual actors, organisations and informal groups and communities of space or identity. The analyst will not assume that all of these entities operate rationally or are equally powerful or are able to achieve their goals in the short term or ever. As Goldstone summaries it, “process tracing involves making deductions about how events are linked over time, drawing on general principles of economics, sociology, psychology, and political science regarding human behaviour” (2003:48). In short, using process tracing, the analyst seeks to uncover and understand the causal sequences that produced the result of interest.

For example, expanding the right-to-buy one’s council house and relying on monetarist thinking for the management of the economy were *choices* which were taken by those in central government, who could have chosen to do otherwise, but who chose these policy directions, at least in the case of the right-to-buy, as they saw this policy as helping to break the Labour Party’s voting-bloc (Hay, 1992). Furthermore, one *could* have sold council houses and used the receipts to improve the existing stock or to build new houses, but such actions *were prohibited* by the Thatcher governments. Such decisions helped to increase homeless (Murie, 2014). So, decisions taken at the macro-level produced outcomes which affected the lives and life-courses of individuals.

**Why Have Politically-Driven Social and Economic Change and Their Role in Explaining Criminal Careers Been Over-Looked?**

These findings beg a series of questions. Naturally, there are many different questions which spring from our research and the processes which we uncovered. What I would like to do herein, however, is to explore why it is that previous studies of criminal careers have *not* uncovered the influence of political decision-making with regards to social and economic policies on engagement in crime. In order to answer this question, one needs first of all to examine the nature of the existing studies of criminal careers. Figure One gives a summary of key aspects of these. To be included, a study needed to fulfil a number of criteria:[[4]](#footnote-4)

* Be a **prospective**, **longitudinal** study (as opposed to being based retrospective one-off interviews, which ruled out, for example, Maruna, 2001 or Shover, 1985).
* Be studies of the **whole of the criminal career** (not just desistance, which, for examples ruled out Farrall, 2002 or Bottoms et al, 2004).
* Be understood to fall within the **quantitative framework** (which ruled out, for example, Healy, 2010 or MacDonald and Marsh, 2006).
* Be based on samples collected from **outwith the criminal justice system** (which ruled out Leibrich, 1993, Calverley, 2013, Zamble and Quinsey, 1997).
* Be based on studies which employ at least **self-report measures** of offending (which ruled out studies such as those which rely on the population registers in Scandinavian countries, and reported on by Galloway and Skardhamer, 2010, for example).
* Be based on data collected in the **‘modern’ era**, which is taken to be those studies initiated since 1945, and which ruled out studies by Godfrey et al, 2007 which was based on data from the 1800s and Sampson and Laub’s re-examination of the Gluecks’ data.
* Not be based on **single offence type** cohorts (such as drug or sexual offenders, or those followed-up as part of a treatment package).
* Not include *only* females, or people on the basis of their being from ethnicity minority (which would have ruled out Calverley 2013, who studied ethnic minorities’ desistance, or Osterman, 2018, who studied only females).

This means that studies of *only* males (such as the Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development) are included, for example. However, since males commit the vast bulk of crime, this is defensible, if not ideal. Figure One shows that of the 39 studies which I have identified, only eight (one fifth) were national samples, and five of these were in the UK, (these eight are shaded in Figure One). In order to identify macro- and meso-level regional variations in experiences, one needs samples with variance in the macro- and meso-levels. In fact, ideally, one would want nationally-representative samples.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, on the basis of Figure One, these appear to be rather hard to come by. This is not to denigrate or dismiss any of the remaining studies, nor it is my intention to suggest for one moment that there is anything inherently ‘wrong’ with, for example, the Cambridge, Dunedin, Edinburgh or Rochester studies, but rather to observe that spatial heterogeneity is more likely to be found (given the principle of spatial auto-correlation, Geary, 1954) if one has a greater number of areas which are geographically distanced from each other. Further, given that many towns and cities in the period which I and my colleagues were interested in often derived their livelihoods from industries which were closely interwoven (such as coalmining, ship-building, steel production, car-making, and railway transportation systems) when *one* of these industries took ‘a hit’, they *all* took that hit, and many (if not *all* in one way, shape or form) of the communities which relied on these for their incomes would have suffered. So, had there been (for example) a Motherwell (Scotland) Longitudinal Study collecting data in the 1980s, it is likely that the data collected there and then would have suggested that pretty much *all* of Motherwell shared the same sort of economic fortune. In the 1950s, pretty much *all* of Motherwell was economically secure (with employment based on steel works and motor vehicle production), but by the late-1980s pretty much *all* of Motherwell would have facing economic trouble, and with it, all of the men, women and children who lived there. Similarly, at the other end of the UK, and indeed the experience of economic restructuring, had there been a Guildford Youth Development Study, there would have been very few of these children living in conditions of pronounced economic need, since Guildford was amongst those places which were untouched by the economic restructuring of the 1980s. So, in both of these fictitious studies, there might have been temporal variation (in that each of their economic fortunes developed over time), but little or no *internal spatial* variation. (There would have been, however, much variation *between* them, one imagines). But yet spatial (as well as temporal) variation is at the heart of what our studies (summarised above) have suggested was happening in the UK during the 1980s. As such, it follows that the reason why the much larger, social, economic and political processes which many criminologists suspect drive crime rates at the aggregate level (Field, 1990) have not been available for modelling using individual-level, longitudinal datasets is because the datasets, by and large, do *not* have *sufficient* spatial variations within them to enable this modelling (and hence theorising) to be undertaken. If a variable is not in an empiricist’s dataset, he or she cannot empirically assess the relationship between it and other variables. So, because those variables relating to (for example) the consequences of politically-driven social and economic change are unavailable for analyses (because the spatial variation required to model them with a sufficient degree of precision was not there) the variables are *not* included in the models and consequently do not make their way into our theorising (save for, thankfully, the contributions of Hagan and Benson). Since many empiricists do not want to ‘go beyond’ their data and say things which they cannot empirically demonstrate (for very good reasons), the role of politics in shaping national-level policies (which play out over time and differently in different places) are not explored, and hence, under-theorised.

There are, of course, very good reasons for locating longitudinal studies in one location (or rather, very good reasons for *not* designing them as national samples). If the children are to be recruited via schools, recruiting from schools in just one area makes such a task administratively much easier. In addition to this, fieldwork costs are kept down, and because the cohort members are located in reasonable proximity to one another, the estimations of local community levels of (for example) social capital or social efficacy are better. So, for very good reasons, longitudinal studies have tended to be based on samples derived from one area (however defined), rather than being national studies, as confirmed by Figure One.

**Figure One: Summary Details of Existing Longitudinal Studies of Criminal Careers**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Name of Study** | **Country** | **How sampled? When born? [Sample N]** |
| 1946 Cohort | Britain | Children born in Britain; born 1946 [5,362] |
| Australian Temperament Project | Australia | Children born in Victoria; born 1982-1983 [2,443] |
| Avon Longitudinal Study of Children and Parents | England | Children born in county of Avon; born 1991-1992 [14,062] |
| British Cohort Study 1970 | Britain | Children born in Britain; born 1970 [16,135] |
| Cambridge Study of Delinquency Development | England | Schools in a London Borough; born 1953 [411] |
| Chicago Neighbourhoods | USA | Children born in Chicago; born 1976-1997. [6,400] |
| Chicago Youth Development Study | USA | Schools in Chicago; born 1977-1979 [341] |
| Columbia County Study | USA | Schools in Columbia County, NY; born 1951-1952 [876] |
| Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study | New Zealand | Children born in Dunedin; born 1972-1973 [1,037] |
| Duisburg Crime in the Modern City | Germany | Schools in Duisburg; born 1988 [3411] |
| Christchurch Health and Development Study | New Zealand | Children born in Christchurch; born 1977 [1,265] |
| Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime | Scotland | Schools in Edinburgh; born 1986-87 [4,300] |
| Houston Study | USA | Schools in Houston; born 1958-1959 [7,618] |
| International Youth Development Study | Australia/USA | Students in Victoria/Washington; born 1987-1992 [2884+2885] |
| Jyvaskyla Longitudinal Study | Finland | Schools in Jyvaskyla; born 1960 [369] |
| Kauai Longitudinal Study | USA | Born in Kauai; born 1955 [698] |
| Longitudinal Survey of Youth | Denmark | Nationally representative sample of children; born 1954 [3151] |
| Mater University Study of Pregnancy | Australia | Children born in Brisbane; born 1981 [7,233] |
| Marion County Youth Study | USA | Schools in Marion; born 1948 [1,227] |
| Mauritius Child Health Project | Mauritius | Children born in two towns in Mauritius; born 1969 [1,795] |
| Millennium Cohort | Britain | Children born in Britain; born 2000-01 [18,818] |
| Montreal Two Samples Study | Canada | Schools and criminal justice system; born 1958-1962 [3,070] |
| National Child Development Study | Britain | Children born in Britain; born 1958 [17,416] |
| National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health | USA | A national sample; born 1976-1981. [20,745] |
| National Youth Survey (Family Study) | USA | National sample; 1959-1965 [1,725] |
| Newcastle 1,000 Families | England | Children born in Newcastle; born 1947 [1,142] |
| New York State Longitudinal Study | USA | Residents in two New York counties; born 1965-1975 [976] |
| Next Steps | England | Sampled from schools; born 1989-90 [15,770] |
| Orebro Individual Development and Adaptation | Sweden | Schools in Orebro; born 1955 [1,027] |
| Oregon Youth Study | USA | Schools in two towns in Oregon; born 1973-1975 [206] |
| Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Developmental Study | England | Schools in Peterborough; born 1992-1993 [716] |
| Pittsburgh Youth Study | USA | Schools in Pittsburgh; born 1974-1981 [1,513] |
| Philadelphia Birth Cohort (1945) | USA | Born and resident in Philadelphia; born 1945 [9,945] |
| Philadelphia Birth Cohort (1958) | USA | Born and resident in Philadelphia; born 1958 [28,338] |
| Rochester Youth Development Study | USA | Schools in Rochester; born 1974-1975 [1,000] |
| Rutgers Health & Human Development Project | USA | Residents in New Jersey; born 1961-1969 [1,380] |
| Seattle Social Development Project | USA | Schools in Seattle; born 1975 [808] |
| Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development | Netherlands | Subsample of Dutch households; born 1967-1973 [669] |
| Zurich Project on the Social Development of Children | Switzerland | Schools in Zurich; born 1997 [1366] |

This is not to suggest that such studies can *never* find spatially-clustered economic (and other) inequalities; far from it, since wealth tends to be clustered spatially, and moreover, these distributions can change over time (Dorling et al, 2007). However, nationally-representative samples enable researchers to more easily identify larger trajectories of experience which play out at lower levels. National samples allow variations in the spatial level(s) of analysis which are harder in samples which are more geographically concentrated. Regions, counties, cities, boroughs and wards are all available for analysis. Single locale studies (be it a city, a part of a city or a region of a country) are more likely to suffer from spatial auto-correlation, making the unpicking of the impacts of macro-level changes all the harder.

Another aspect of our work was the use of repeated cohorts (born in 1958 and 1970). These twelve years may not sound like much, but the environments which these two cohorts grew up in would have been quite different in important ways. The 1958 cohort grew up during a period of relative wealth and national achievement (a booming economy, a commitment to full employment, sporting dominance, and an expanding welfare state); the 1970 cohort grew up during the era of the three-day week, energy cuts, miners’ strikes, a heroin epidemic, the AIDS/HIV crisis and the start of cuts to the welfare state. The latter cohort appears to have become more enmeshed in the processes which are held to be the precursors to offending (truancy from school, homelessness and disengagement from the economy). Arguably, all of these were a consequence of social and economic upheaval they were living through (on which see Farrall et al 2017). This issue (of changes in experience over time) raises another deficiency with the design of *almost all* longitudinal studies in criminology, namely that they are often studies of *single* cohorts. In fact, the only studies which have explicitly captured more than one cohort’s experience are the Pittsburgh Youth Study, the Philadelphia cohorts, and the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighbourhoods, (Raudenbusch, 2005, Sampson 2012).

In the UK, this picture is changing. As well as the NCDS and the BCS70, the Next Steps cohort collects data from those born in England in 1989-90, and the Millennium Cohort Study collects data from those children born in 2000-01. However, in the NCDS and BCS70, data relating to offending and victimisation is rarely asked after the year 2000 (when the samples were aged 42 and 30 respectively), making them far from ideal for studying offending or victimisation over the life-course. It is hard, therefore, not to come to several rather downbeat assessments regarding contemporary longitudinal criminal careers research. These are:

* Wider social, economic and political structures are rarely included in the analyses, largely as a result of features of the research design.
* Macro-level spatial variations in the above (and other factors and processes) are therefore infrequently analysed.
* Temporal variations are rarely studied since most designs are of a single cohort.

This has resulted in a situation in which key macro- and meso-level variables and processes have not been included in the analyses, and hence the *theorising* of the causes of offending at the individual-level. The answer to the question posed at the start of this subsection, then, is that quite basic, and perfectly understandable, decisions made when longitudinal studies of criminal careers were being designed have resulted in a situation in which the role of political decision-making, the macro-level policies which were adopted and the consequences of these is not readily apparent to researchers. The consequences of this, however, are that criminologists are not able to fully model and explain why some people commit crime and others don’t, or why it is that some cohorts of people are more likely to become engaged in crime than others. On the very few occasions when such analyses have been possible (using the Pittsburgh Youth Study, Fabio et al, 2006), the researchers found that rates of family poverty and of residential instability in the area in which someone was living were powerful explanations of why one cohort of youths was more likely to engage in violent crime than a subsequent one. Fabio et al conclude that:

“these results provide evidence that changes in violence rates over time are due in part to changing social factors and are not due to intrinsic differences between cohorts”. (2006:157).

They go on to argue that:

“individual development, hence risk, is inﬂuenced by the ongoing structure of the social situations in which the individual lives or interacts”. (2006:158).

Moreover, the period during which these cohorts’ lives unfolded was the 1980s and 1990s, during which the Pittsburgh area lost over half of its (in 1980) 90,000 steel-workers; by 1984 there were just 44,000 such workers in the Pittsburgh area. This is especially interesting as it resonates with the findings which my colleagues and I produced, namely, that the dramatic changes in processes of neo-liberal economic governance was associated with the loss of work in heavy industry and an increase in young peoples’ engagement in crime (especially males growing up in those areas). What is needed now are similar studies which enable the criminological research community to explore the ways in which dramatic social and economic change may affect the life-courses, and hence engagement in crime, of those people living in some of our most disadvantaged communities. It is important to acknowledge that this is not going to be an easy task, since research projects aimed at exploring social and economic change are complex beasts to design and execute. Whilst I hope to have made the case for such projects, this is not the place to discuss the intricacies of research design.

**Conclusion**

My critique has been as much epistemological as it is methodological. I have reviewed the theorising on the role of national-level trajectories of policies and fortunes and their effect on individual-level offending careers. This theorising has suggested that one would expect that macro-level policies to have the potential to affect individual life-courses, and hence their involvement in crime. However, few have been able to demonstrate the existence of such processes, and it is argued that this is due to the sorts of research designs which criminologists have employed (which have tended to collect data from and about locally-derived cohorts, rather than nationally-representative samples). When alternative research designs (employing nationally-representative, rather than community-based samples) have been used, or which have drawn on multiple birth cohorts to examine how politically-inspired social change can alter experiences, behaviours and life-courses, the sorts of processes and outcomes which theorists such as John Hagan or Michael Benson have posited *ought* to exist are indeed found *to* exist. The faults, however, do not lie solely with criminologists; funding agencies ‘shape’ (via their calls for potential projects) what is expected and what can be accommodated financially. Longitudinal projects are not cheap to establish or maintain, and hence there is an unmet need for a nationally-derived longitudinal study of offending (and victimisation) over the life-course in almost any country or jurisdiction one could care to mention. This lacuna suggests not just that we may need to re-examine the architecture of future longitudinal studies, but that we may also need to rethink some of our theories of causation and the onset of criminal careers.

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1. See McAra and McVie (2017) for a comprehensive review of this field and its contributions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I am indebted to one of the reviewers for encouraging me to reinforce the importance of these alternative explanations. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One of the journal’s reviewers asked me to explain why it was that economic restructuring was the variable focused upon; could it not have been some other change taking place in Britain at that time which accounted for processes we documented, they asked. My answer is that there were very few other changes which were as dramatic as the economic restructuring experienced in (some parts of) Britain at the time. Economic inequality rose during the 1980s, but between 1979 and 1985, this was due to unemployment, itself part of economic restructuring, whilst from 1985 to 1990, rises in economic inequality were related to government policies (Atkinson, 2000:365). Age structure (Ritchie and Roser, 2019) and immigration both remained stable in the 1970s and 1980s. The criminal justice system changed most dramatically during the 1990s, as punitive policies took hold (Farrall et al, 2016b). There were no major changes in education policies until later in the 1980s (following the 1988 Education Act), and whilst the housing system changed, this mainly redistributed crime (Farrall et al, 2016a), rather than increasing it. The changes to the social security system affected those who had been made unemployed, and so served only to augment the changes resulting from economic restructuring. The only other major developments or events during the 1980s were the rise of AIDS (which is unlikely to have affected crime rates), the Falklands War (April-June 1982) and the miner’s strike (March 1984-March 1985), which was part of the processes of economic restructuring. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. These criteria were chosen so as to place the critique firmly within the criminal careers paradigm (which has traditionally been quantitative), and so as to explicitly rule out evaluations of criminal justice interventions or studies of single offence/offender types (which only collect data about those who have offended, and are often based on reconvictions rather than self-report studies). As valuable as such studies are, they do not tend to deal with extended periods of people’s life-courses and so fall outwith this critique. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. One reviewer suggested that it was “incorrect to say that national samples are necessary to study macrosocial change. It depends on what is changing and how unevenly.” I have some sympathy with this point; there are, of course, situations and contexts in which national samples may *not* be needed. The most obvious example where national samples may not be needed is the USA, where most individual states are of sufficient size and heterogeneity to enable the study of geographical variations in the effects of social change. However, even within the USA there have been large-scale spatial variations in economic experiences and social change (hence terms like ‘the rust belt’ or ‘the dust bowl’), and so even there comparing the experiences of those most-directly affected and those whose lives were untouched would require multi-state studies. Because, in the USA, criminal justice is a state-level responsibility, and since social and economic change may interact with criminal justice policies, national-level cohorts may, however, be still advantageous. Indeed, the importance of cohorts as a way of unpicking the effects of social change has been recognised by Laub and Sampson (2020), and used to explore how social change can effect engagement in crime over the life-course by Payne and Piquero (2020), Raudenbusch (2005) and Shen et al (2020). Given that longitudinal studies cannot easily be established retrospectively, and that it might not always be easy to establish *a priori* which regions of a country are most likely to experience social changes, national-level studies strike me as the best research design. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)