

Research into 1980s crime trends could predict how policy affects future offending rates

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New research from the University of Derby identifying the link between the performance of the UK economy and crime trends could predict the

consequence of key government policies, including ending the current furlough scheme and Brexit, say academics.

The study, funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council, part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), is the first of its kind to find a strong link between the [economic downturn](#) in Britain during the 1980s and offending among young people in areas of severe industrial decline, some of whom remained involved in [crime](#) for 20 years or so.

The University's Professor Stephen Farrall, Dr. Emily Gray and Dr. Phil Jones analyzed data from the British Cohort Study of over 16,000 people born in one week in April 1970, cross-referencing it with statistics on police cautions and local employment levels.

The researchers found that in areas such as south Wales, central Scotland and northern parts of England, where the coal, steel, ship and railway industries were affected by the economic downturn during the 1980s, young people were much more likely to get into trouble with the police, and to then keep offending for several decades.

They also established that the number of people receiving cautions was directly related to the economic fortunes of the county in which they lived. In those areas with the lowest levels of economic restructuring, less than 10% were offending when aged 26-30, but in the areas with the highest levels of economic change, this figure was almost 15%.

This meant, the researchers argue, that during the 1980s job losses brought on by the shift away from heavy industry, and the lack of alternative employment in the economic downturn associated with this, drew young people into crime, which then became a lifestyle they found hard to leave behind.

Professor Farrall said that the study, now published in full in the journal

Politics and Society, is the first to quantifiably link the long-term effects of the collapse of heavy industry on young people's crime records.

He said: "No one has ever attempted to study the link between individual offending careers and political decision-making. Current approaches adopted by criminologists tend to focus on the offender's personal characteristics and have failed to engage with the way that political decision-making shapes the lives and life courses of citizens. This study provides evidence about how important the policies are not just to the economy, but also how these can have a knock-on effect on crime rates and the 'kick-starting' of offending careers. It shows that the process of deindustrialisation took away [young people](#)'s hope and aspirations when they were young by making their parents unemployed and hitting their own job prospects. That could lead to them turning to drugs and crime."

Professor Farrall said that while it was hard to draw firm comparisons with the upcoming closure of the government's current Job Retention (furlough) Scheme, his team's research did suggest that one consequence of a dramatic increase in unemployment rates might be an immediate increase in crime, and over the long-term it might result in more people becoming entrenched in offending careers which they then found hard to escape from.

He added: "Only time will tell what happens, but it is not unreasonable to expect an increase in some forms of crime over the next few years if the economy is dramatically restructured. If there is a widespread increase in offending, one would also expect that not all of those drawn into it will be able to cease it easily, meaning that they may continue to offend for several years."

More information: Stephen Farrall et al. Politics, Social and Economic Change, and Crime: Exploring the Impact of Contextual Effects on Offending Trajectories, *Politics & Society* (2020). [DOI](#):

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