

Thatcher's Legacy from 1979 into the 21st Century: Work Sheet

1. Introduction

This worksheet supports discussion of the film 'Society Politics and Change: Exploring the Legacy of Thatcherism'. Reading is not essential, but it may aid understanding of the issues raised.

Who was Margaret Thatcher?

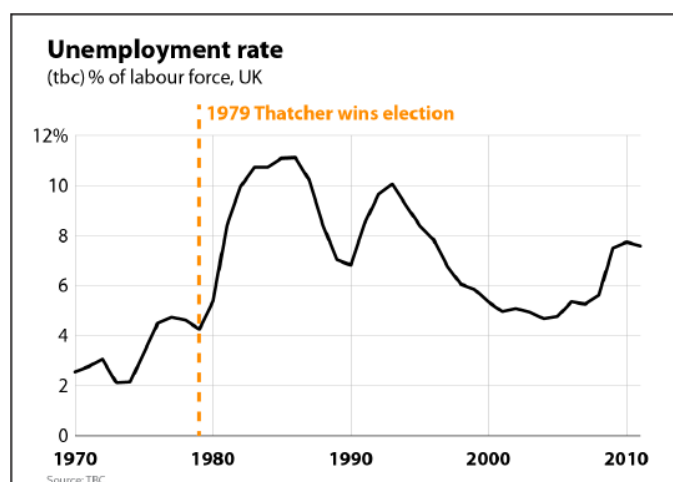
Margaret Thatcher came into power in 1979 as the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. By the 1980s an 'ism' became attached to her name - 'Thatcherism'. This represented a new branch of Conservative ideology which encompassed the role of competition and a free market, limited government involvement in industry, low taxes and individual responsibility. This framework of economic and social arrangements continued after Thatcher left office in 1991 and was pursued by following Prime Ministers, such as John Major (Conservative) and also Tony Blair (New Labour).

Who made this film?

A group of academics and a film-maker made this film together. It is based on a long-term study of Thatcherism – and the detailed findings of this research are available to read in online. The academics are Professor Stephen Farrall and Dr. Emily Gray.

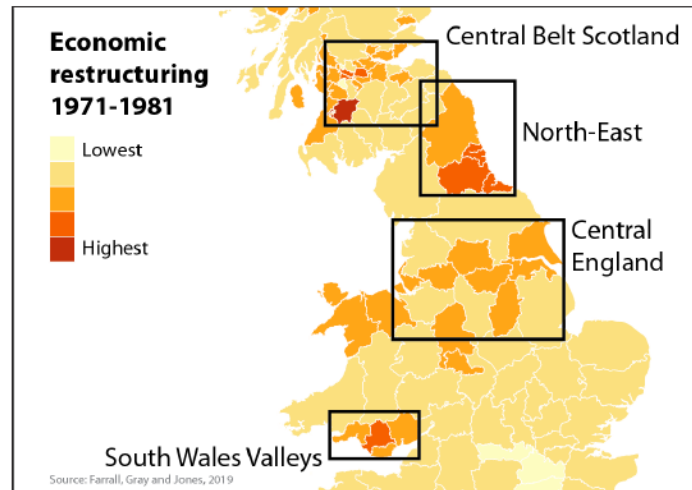
2. The economy

The graph below depicts unemployment from 1970 to 2010. It had been rising throughout the 1970s as companies began modernising their working practices, but it rose dramatically after the Conservatives took power in 1979, rising to over three million out of work in 1983. Unemployment hit Northern Ireland, along with the industrial areas of northern and central England as well as parts of Scotland. It impacted the working classes first, before a further rise in unemployment in the 1990s, which affected the middle classes and the housing market. In our research, we have found unemployment during this period was related to rises in property crime (higher levels of burglary) and income inequality (where the gaps between the poor and the rich become greater).



3. Where was unemployment concentrated?

Looking below at the change in **economic restructuring** – that is the shift from large numbers of people employed in heavy industry, such as mining, shipbuilding and steel manufacturing – we know certain parts of the country were affected more than others. This map shows the areas that experienced the highest and lowest levels of economic change between 1971 and 1981. South Wales, Central England, North East England and Central belt Scotland were hit the hardest as long-standing industries in these areas were closed. Local people struggled for many years to find new jobs to replace the ones they had lost.

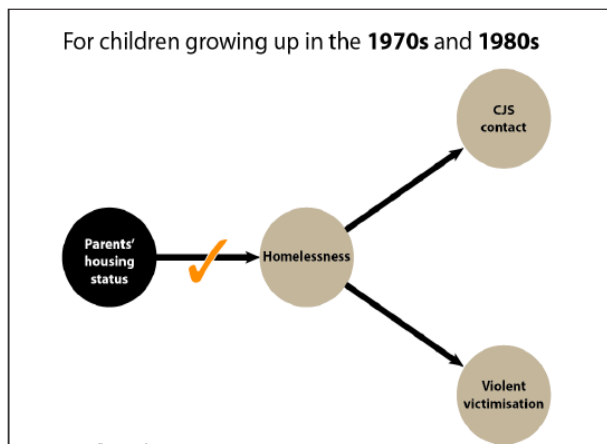
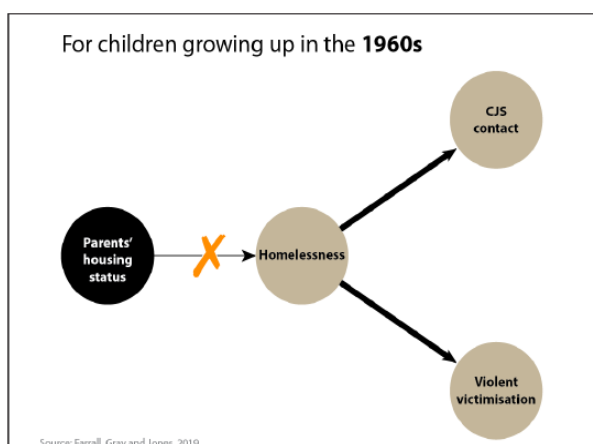


Discussion points:

- What do you understand by the term 'economic restructuring'?
- What might be the consequences for whole communities suffering long-term unemployment?

4. Housing

In 1979, around a third of homes were owned by councils and local authorities. After Margaret Thatcher came into power she launched a policy called 'the right to buy' which meant those living in a council house or flat were allowed to buy it at a very discounted rate. This was a popular policy with many, however, it also meant that over time, councils had fewer homes to provide to those who needed housing. Our research found that the sale of council homes also had a negative impact on the children of families who resided in council-owned properties in the 1980s. If your parents were not able to buy their council home, perhaps because they did



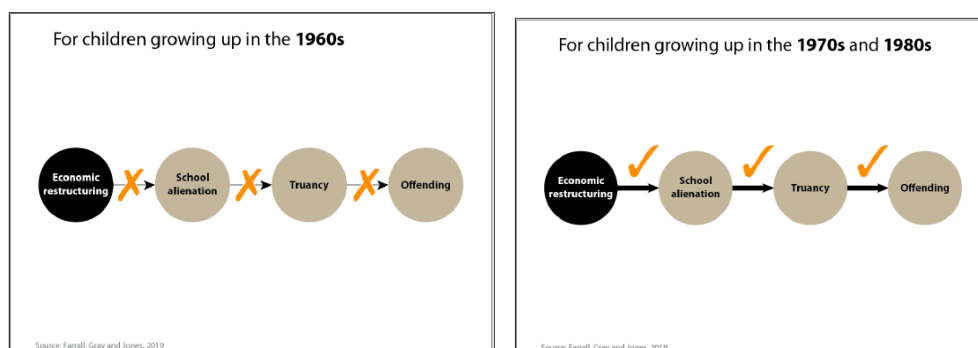
not have the financial resources to do so, or because it was not a desirable property to buy, you were at greater risk (on average) of becoming homeless as you entered adulthood. And if you became homeless in the 1980s, you were then at high risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system and/or becoming a victim of violent crime (right hand graph above). We tested this pattern again with people grew up in a different period, in the 1960s – but it did not apply (see the left hand graph). So, there was something particular about being poor and in need of housing during the 1980s which proved to be damaging for some people.

Discussion points:

- Why might the ‘right to buy’ policy be good for some families, but bad for others?
- Is good affordable housing easy to access now in the 21st century? Should we bring back more council housing?

5. Education

Our research found a link between the amount of economic restructuring (see above) an area experienced in the 1980s, with local young people subsequently feeling ‘alienated’ from school. We also found evidence that those who felt school was a ‘waste of time’ were more likely to truant and commit criminal offences (right hand graph). This same pattern was tested with a large group of children who grew up in the decade before – in the 1960s/70s - but it did not apply (left hand graph). This is because the country was not as badly affected by economic restructuring during this period, so the pupils felt less disillusioned. As more children remained in school, fewer got involved in crime. However, a generation later, in the 1980s, pupils from the areas worst-hit hit by unemployment began to see school as pointless.

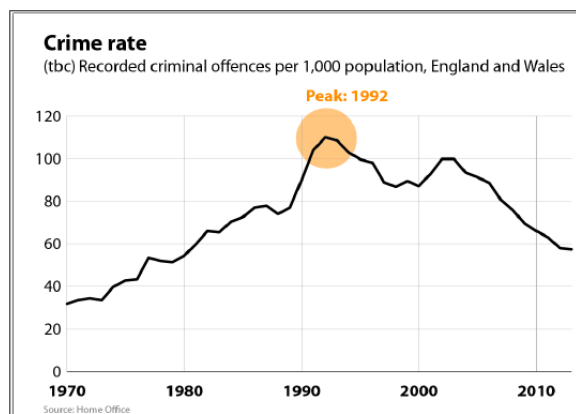


Discussion points:

- Why might very high levels of local unemployment put young people off of school?
- Do you think young people today feel school is ‘worth it’? Why might that be?

6. Crime

Crime rose dramatically during the 1980s and peaked in 1992. Crime rates rise and fall for different reasons – and those reasons can also change over time. In the 1970s crime probably started to rise as people had more ‘consumables’ to steal, such as televisions, cars, video and record players. In the 1980s, crime rates were affected by unemployment and the benefit system being cut back. There was also a large-scale influx of the drug heroin, which created a new generation of addicts who needed to fund their habit. Crime came down in the early 1990s, as the economy recovered.



Rising crime in the 1980s also led to an intensification of punitive (stricter) legislation in the 1990s. Prisons became responsible more offenders on longer sentences, probation worked with a bigger caseload on tighter supervision requirements and more young people were brought into the criminal justice system than ever before. After 1993 the criminal justice system had a wide range of methods for dealing with crime and previous attempts to limit imprisonment, deliver leniency or secure legal protections for defendants were set aside.

Discussion points:

- Why does crime go up and down over time?
- What should be the purpose of the criminal justice system – to imprison, to reform or to punish?

7. Social Attitudes

But what about attitudes? We conducted a survey about Thatcher's legacy 40 years after she first became Prime Minister. We found that many people, *especially* those under the age of 35 hold values which are in line with her ideas, such as wanting to own their own business or wanting to send their children to private school. Older people, over 65 also demonstrate support for Thatcherite policies. However, those who grew up during Thatcher's leadership (those who are now 'middle-aged') were far less positive. They are more likely to say she was 'bad' for the country and her policies were damaging for individuals. These complex results suggest Thatcherism is still relevant today, while some of her policies did not succeed, there is widespread acceptance of many of them.

Discussion points:

- Do you consider yourself 'Thatcherite' in any way – explain.
- Why might those who grew-up during Thatcher's administrations feel more negatively about her government's policies compared to others?

8. Conclusion

Over the last 30 or 40 years, the economy has become the measure by which the success of a nation is measured. We have also seen a reduction in levels of union membership, therefore people are less protected in the workplace than they might once have been. The economy has simultaneously become polarised into the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Yet, societies with high levels of economic inequality, also tend to have high levels of health problems, crime and deprivation. Despite the exit of Thatcher and her successor, John Major, subsequent governments (including the New Labour government of 1997) have consolidated the work of Thatcher and Thatcherism is now a key part of our political culture.