Families in the firing line: prosecutions for truancy in Coventry, 1874–1899
Nicola Sheldon

Abstract
This case study of truancy in Coventry puts into a local context a national phenomenon of considerable concern to local authorities in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The records of parents prosecuted for their child’s truancy over a twenty-five year period provided the data for analysis. It was possible to produce a profile of the truants and their families within the socio-economic context of a Midlands industrial town with a unique mix of occupational sectors. Parental involvement in local textile, watchmaking and cycle industries certainly affected the propensity of children to truant, but other factors such as housing and neighbourhood seem also to have been important factors as indicators of truancy. Underlying all of these issues was the effect of poverty on parental attitudes to schooling, exemplified most starkly by the experience of lone mothers who figured more prominently in the truancy figures by the 1890s, and by when more parents conformed to school attendance laws.

Introduction
Two different approaches are commonly used by historians in dealing with the question of school attendance. One is to examine changes in the law and the gradually-developing efficiency of the policing authorities over time.¹ The other is to place truancy within a particular socio-economic context and explain its decline as a gradual absorption of new social expectations into family life, with some resistance related to the issue of child labour, particularly in rural areas and the textile districts of northern England.² In this local case study of Coventry, different ‘official’ sources have been cross-referenced in an attempt to do both—that is to understand what the authorities were doing about truancy and also to analyse the characteristics of the families prosecuted for non-attendance at school, within the context of the particular industrial and social conditions of Coventry in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Coventry was pre-eminently a working-class, industrial town with three ‘unique’ industries for the West Midlands: watchmaking, silk weaving and, from the late 1880s, the emergent cycle industry. The latter became the basis for Coventry’s twentieth-

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century flowering as a centre for light engineering. John Prest’s account of the crises in the silk weaving industry in the 1860s shows that industrial conditions in Coventry were frequently unstable, with many skilled workers being forced to leave the city as trade declined. The population declined from 41,000 in 1861 to 37,670 by 1871 but it had recovered to 44,831 by 1881 and grew to 52,724 by 1891. This fairly modest growth (especially compared with Coventry’s expansion in the twentieth century) reflects the precariousness of both the long-established and new trades in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as new factory-based production in silk weaving and continental competition in the watchmaking trade affected the livelihoods of skilled workers and their families.

The introduction of universal elementary schooling both from the national perspective and that of the Coventry working population has to be set against the insecurity of many family incomes at the time. Forster’s Act of 1870 is usually taken to be the landmark act in the introduction of universal elementary education. Yet it was a permissive act with respect to attendance; compulsion was not enacted until 1880 and then not practically enforced, especially in rural areas, for several years after that. However, the 1870 Act was designed to enable action most urgently in the burgeoning cities and towns, where thousands of children roamed the streets unsupervised by parents during the working day. Coventry was in the ‘second wave’ of (mainly urban) school boards to pass their compulsory attendance bye-laws in 1873, following London and the large cities. School provision reflected the social circumstances of the town with relatively few middle-class patrons and a major deficit of school places. Despite some support from nonconformists for early elementary schools, provision in Coventry was inadequate. This ensured the setting up of a school board after the 1870 Act, which then constructed and later expanded several large elementary schools, catering for up to 800 children in each. The Board’s activity provoked Anglicans in the city to expand their schools in the 1890s to accommodate the city’s growing child population. Nonetheless, during the period 1874–1899, there was for most of the time a shortage of school places, which must have made it difficult to enforce attendance or to place recalcitrant truants in alternative schools.

For a short period following the implementation of compulsion in Coventry a large number of parents, including skilled workers and shop traders, fell foul of the new bye-laws but, by the late 1870s, the number of absentees recorded by the city’s attendance officers fell away dramatically. Yet the records of the Coventry School Board show that

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4 Hurt, Elementary schooling, 188–99.
5 Rubinstein, School attendance, 18.
7 Coventry School Board (hereafter CoSB) Visiting officer’s daily report book, Coventry History Centre, Bayley Lane, Coventry CV1 5QP (hereafter CHC), SLA/S4/1. Figures for 1873–1876 include occupations such as tailor and butcher as well as watchmakers, etc. The number of absentees recorded per month fell from 233 in March 1873 to 62 in March 1876.
persistent absenteeism by a minority continued to cause considerable concern both to schools and to those responsible for improving attendance. The Board expressed frustration at the limited impact which sanctions appeared to have on the behaviour of parents and children who continued to truant.8

This situation was replicated in many local authorities across the country, yet there is little information on the truanting children and the families prosecuted.9 The aim of this local study is to make use of an unusual source to shed some light on the social condition of truants and their families in Coventry and perhaps also of their wider communities in which truanting was common. It aims to come to some understanding of the reasons why these working-class families ‘resisted’ the state’s requirement that they send their children regularly to school, and perhaps also to shed light on why this was a problem for local authorities across the country.

**Sources**

Few sources offer the opportunity to investigate the social circumstances of those involved in truancy, although the perceptions of the authorities and their tactics in dealing with it are evident from school board records. During research into truancy across a number of local authorities, an unusual source came to light—the Coventry Summons Book, a handwritten record over 80 pages long covering 3,166 prosecutions for truancy in the Coventry magistrates’ court from 1874–1899.10 It is a rare, possibly unique, source covering nineteenth-century truancy.11 It is not possible to estimate what proportion of truanting children the Summons Book includes. Partly this is because truancy itself is an elastic term which may refer to a range of reasons for absence which are unacceptable to those in authority. School attendance rates in Coventry are available only for sporadic dates in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Although there are records showing how many absentees were visited by each attendance officer, many of these children were listed as sick or ‘absent through other reasonable causes’.12 Thus it is difficult to quantify rates of truancy. Certainly, local authorities sought to avoid the expense of prosecution in all but recalcitrant cases. The parents listed in the Summons Book had reached the end of a long process of visits and warnings and their children were presumably ‘confirmed’ as persistent truants, so the data can be considered a valuable historical source of information about truancy in Coventry if not a record of the full picture.

8 CoSB Minutes, 19.1.1882, CHC, SLA/5/1/1.
11 There appear to be no similar sources listed on Access to Archives <URL http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/advanced-search.aspx?tab=1 [Accessed 19.03.09].
In each case listed in the Coventry Summons Book, the parent’s name, address, name of child and his/her age plus the outcome of the proceedings were recorded. It was therefore possible to create a database of families and analyse the pattern of prosecution, the ages of the children involved and the incidence of different types of penalty. For some years, occupational data was recorded for the fathers, and it was also possible to determine the number of female-headed households involved where mothers were prosecuted as the head of household. A more detailed social analysis of family circumstances was completed for a group of nearly 250 families from the Summons Book. This smaller group was chosen because their prosecutions occurred in one of the census years (1881 and 1891) and this maximised the chance of tracing them on the census returns. Cross-referencing between the Summons Book and the census enabled a process of ‘family reconstruction’ which built up a detailed social profile of the truants and their families. Contextual information was drawn from local manuscript sources such as school board minute books and secondary works on the socio-economic conditions in Coventry during the period.

This local study demonstrates the ways in which electronic media can facilitate the management of sources which in the past would have been difficult to search and analyse without considerable research support. By reproducing the Summons Book as a series of digital photographs, it was much easier to zoom in on details, decipher faded hand-writing and compile a large database, with the continual ability to reference back to the original source. Use of the online census made the cross-referencing of family details much quicker than would have been the case if microfiche records had been used. Recording of the key details from the online census took on average three minutes per family, whereas a search for eight ‘missing’ families on the census microfiches in Coventry Local Studies Library took a whole morning. The study of population data is already benefiting from many online sources, but this study shows the potential for individual work on unusual manuscript sources available in local archives.

**Coventry compared with national trends**

Figure 1 shows that the trend in prosecutions for non-attendance in Coventry appears to have mirrored the national trend, with a peak in the late 1870s, a plateau through the 1880s with some variation from year to year, then a steady decline after 1892 and another lower peak from 1897–1898. Coventry School Board, like many urban authorities, began enforcing its attendance bye-laws systematically in the mid-1870s. It instituted a big push on attendance in 1878 and continued to maintain a slightly lower level of prosecutions throughout the 1880s. The prosecutions did not fall away immediately after the ending of school fees in 1891, but within a year they were declining rapidly. This may indicate that there had not been the expected immediate increase in attendance of children from the poorest families, previously unable to pay fees, but that increasing the number of prosecutions in 1892 and cancelling arrears of fees did have an effect on attendance.13

Unfortunately, there are no figures for overall school attendance for Coventry for the 1890s to enable a comparison between prosecutions and attendance levels around the date that school fees ended. The minor peak in prosecutions from 1897–1898 seems to have been related to increased prosecution of older children, possibly following the raising of the school leaving age in 1893.

Neighbourhood and truancing

The Summons Book reveals a great deal about the characteristics of the families involved. To some extent, the pattern of non-attendance reflected a cost to families, both in terms of fees and the loss of child-help or income to the family, so it must have been influenced by local economic conditions and family arrangements. The decision to truant would not always be a ‘family’ decision, but it was one which arose out of a set of circumstances within a family and was susceptible to influences from the local context—such as the occupations of parents, their ability to supervise their children, their need for the child’s labour, income or time and the influence of community ‘culture’ on children’s expectations. The decision to prosecute might also have been affected by a range of factors: for instance, the gender and age of the child concerned and the reasons for its absence from school. There is evidence that many local authorities were lenient towards mothers who kept older girls at home to help with younger siblings and that

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Coventry was a largely working-class town and there were no significant middle-class districts. Its housing was distinctive in terms of its density and lack of facilities, even amongst nineteenth-century urban industrial centres. Housing density reached its peak at the turn of the century following an industrial boom in the mid-1890s. For instance, in the centre of the city, where a disproportionate number of the families in the truants’ sample lived, housing density was 17.2 per acre by 1901, compared with four per acre for the city as a whole (see Figure 2). This was caused by the infilling of gardens and plots occupied by larger houses on the main streets with two-storey back-to-back houses and small factories, built in virtually enclosed courtyards accessed by a single narrow alleyway from the main road. This housing pattern produced self-contained ‘pockets’ of

Figure 2  Map of Coventry city centre, 1906


Note: Well Street (upper left) with ‘infill’ slum housing clearly visible. The majority of the families in the Summons Book lived in this area of the city. Hillfields, the weavers’ ‘suburb’, lay to the north and Chapelfields, the watchmakers’ ‘suburb’, to the west.


16 B. Lancaster and A. Mason eds, Life and labour in a twentieth century city: the experience of Coventry (Warwick, 1987), 342.

poverty behind better-off residences. Analysis of the addresses of those prosecuted showed as expected that there were concentrations of truants in the enclosed courtyards of the central area.

The lists of prosecutions show that the authorities carried out occasional ‘truancy blitzes’, by taking a large number of the parents living in a particular yard or street to court at the same time. For instance, on 10 July 1880 all 12 respondents lived in courtyards behind Well Street and neighbouring Bond Street, two streets just to the north of the city centre. Of these 12, five were in court again in 1881 or 1882. Occasionally, repeated ‘blitzes’ feature in the record. A number of residents of Castle Street, situated in the crowded centre of the city, appeared in February 1883 and then again in September 1884. The prosecution of poor ‘neighbourhoods’ was characteristic only of the 1880s: by the 1890s, the distribution of the prosecuted was much wider across the city. The reputations of certain districts, even of particular streets and courtyards, in terms of poverty and respectability, may well have led the authorities to focus on those areas, as much as information obtained from schools. The fine gradations of the working-class social scale were apparent not only to the authorities but to each neighbourhood’s occupants, even though its occupational make-up might be diverse. At the same time, families and children were influenced by the ‘habits’ of their local community, the courtyard or street.

‘Blitz’ tactics must have been a policy of last resort to some extent, as individuals’ addresses were difficult to track down. Coventry’s topography was ideally suited to the avoidance of detection by school attendance officers, as children and parents could keep out of sight in what was effectively a hidden world of back-to-back houses behind the main streets. The house numbering itself was imprecise and confusing, since up to a dozen houses in each courtyard took the number of the house on the street in front of it, and this led to more difficulties in tracking down truants and identifying addresses in court. For the frustrated authorities, a clamp-down from time to time might have seemed the best way to ‘send a message’ to certain districts that school attendance was going to be enforced.

**Child labour and the age of truants**

The truanting children listed ranged in age from 6 to 13. The very few six-year olds in the Summons Book were the siblings of older children also being prosecuted. The number of children aged nine or under, however, was quite significant, forming 32 per cent of all cases. It is unlikely that a child of this age would have been in paid employment in the 1870s, and less so by the 1890s, but it was certainly possible that parents kept them at home for domestic tasks or to assist in small-scale textile work. 18

Child labour, whether casual paid work or unpaid helping at home, is a more plausible

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Explanation for the 69 per cent of truants aged 10–13. The proportions of truants of different ages remained fairly constant over the years recorded, although there was a trend towards the prosecution of older children, within the declining number of total prosecutions, in the later 1890s. Coventry had approximately 600 half-timers in school each year during the 1880s, which reflected significant opportunities for child labour in the local silk textile trade, though half-time working was not integral to the schooling system to the same extent as in parts of Lancashire and West Yorkshire. Absenteeism among older children may also have increased due to the uncertainty of work for adults, both men and women, in the Coventry trades from the 1860s onwards. Almost all prosecutions were of parents rather than employers. In 1878, there were ‘exemplary’ prosecutions of a group of small-scale employers, typical of Coventry businesses, but this was exceptional.

Occupations and pressures on family incomes

Beyond their names and addresses, the data on parents was patchy, as occupations were only recorded in two sections of the Summons Book, part of 1878 and three years from 1885–1888. These are compared in Figure 3. The entries for 1878 include 36 different

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Figure 3  Distribution of the most numerous occupational headings listed in the summons book, 1878 and 1885–1888

Source: Coventry School Board Register of Summonses for Non-Attendance, 1874–9, Coventry History Centre, SLA/5/4/2.

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19 CoSB Minutes, SLA/5/1/3 21.5.1891 refers to the Coventry Cotton Company having established its own school to cater for half-timers.

20 Prest, Industrial revolution, 84–8, 130–5; Lancaster and Mason, Life and labour, 12–21 describe the period 1880–1914 as one of ‘industrial transition’ in Coventry.
occupations. This variety—including a newsagent, coal dealer, hairdresser and even a policeman—shows the wide social spread of families involved in non-attendance in the 1870s. By the late 1870s truancy was already associated with a minority of children, but certainly not limited to the poor or marginal groups. This is clear from the fact that 50 per cent of the fathers prosecuted were working in the skilled trades of silk ribbon weaving and watchmaking, while under 20 per cent were listed as general labourers.

Many male silk ribbon weavers of Coventry, however, were members of a declining domestic production system, while the trade as a whole was becoming an increasingly factory-based and feminised one. By the 1880s, new weaving factories were replacing the domestic system, with elastic weaving, cotton thread and frillings, plus silk bookmarkers emerging, but by no means filling the gap in terms of employment capacity. Manufacturing was still largely concentrated in small workshops, some of them on the top storey of terraces of workers’ cottages, to enable weavers and their families to access steam-driven machinery for ‘domestic’ production. Women were commonly involved in assisting the weavers, often as winders and warpers, and children as fillers and pickers-up.21 Possibly the weavers were using the labour of their children, as well as their wives, to sustain family incomes in a situation of increasing competition and low wages.

Similarly the watchmaking trade, although ostensibly a skilled occupation, was characterised in Coventry by an elaborate assembly process organised on an outworking system, with each worker concentrating on a single aspect of the production process.22 The watchmaking trade was certainly under threat from continental competition by the 1870s, but it was not turning towards mechanised production as was the case with silk manufacture. Instead, the response of the industry had been to sub-divide the assembly process to an even greater degree, producing a lot of intra-occupational variation in earnings and insecure employment. Some watchmakers lived in houses with extensive workshops attached to their homes. However, most of the watchmakers prosecuted for truancy lived in the centre of Coventry, and in the back-to-back courtyards rather than the purpose-built watchmakers’ housing of Chapelfields. Probably the men prosecuted were journeymen on the fringes of the trade and likely to have intermittent or insecure income.23

It is noticeable that, by the mid-1880s, the number of weavers and watchmakers as a proportion of those being prosecuted had declined. In the case of the watchmakers this reflected a decline in the numbers employed in Coventry.24 They had been replaced by a

24 Census figures for 1881 and 1891 show a decline of watchmakers in the Coventry workforce from 25.7 per cent to 15.5 per cent, whereas weavers were 4–5 per cent at both dates. Employment in cycles increased from 3.25 per cent to 19.7 per cent. These figures should be treated with caution as occupational data is not available for Coventry alone in the 1881 census, so figures for Warwickshire have been used.
Premises or machinery as most of the parts were made elsewhere. Little capital was needed to set up a bicycle factory, and consequently the pattern of employment was similar to Coventry’s other trades, with numerous small employers, often transient ones, working in a boom and bust environment as orders for bicycles fluctuated widely in the 1880s and 1890s. The work in sewing machines and bicycles was well-paid assembly work, but insecure and seasonal, so perhaps contributing to a demand for child labour when the breadwinner’s income was interrupted by a lack of work.

Weavers form 20 per cent of the sample in the Summons Book in 1878 but only 9 per cent of it in 1885–1888. One explanation for the higher levels of non-attendance by their children at the earlier date is that there was still a significant demand for child labour in small workshops in 1878, but this had declined somewhat by 1885–1888. Nonetheless,

small workshops in 1878, but this had declined somewhat by 1885–1888. Nonetheless, weaving families were over-represented at both dates compared with their numbers in Coventry as a whole, and this could be attributed to endemic poverty, insecure employment and the demand for child labour in domestic production.

The more ‘middle-class’ occupations mentioned in 1878, such as hairdresser and newsagent, were absent in the mid-1880s sample, but parents with skilled trades still appeared. The distinguishing feature of them all is that they lived in the same districts, streets and courtyards as those prosecuted in 1878, and this is the major common factor between the two samples. There were a few from the 1885–1888 sample who lived out in the weavers’ ‘suburb’ of Hillfields, and some near the new bicycle works to the east of the city (see Figure 4), but most lived in the old central area, with its crowded back-to-back housing (see Figure 2). The absence of better-off parents perhaps indicates that the latter were now conforming to the attendance laws, whereas the poor of the central districts remained the main target of attention.

**Single parent families and truancy**

Figure 3 also shows the incidence of female-headed households in the lists for 1878 and the mid-1880s. It is clear that prosecutions of such women increased over time. Because women were generally summoned only when they were the householder, it is possible to analyse the incidence of female-headed households across the whole period 1874–1899. Most of the women named were probably widows, though some could have been deserted wives or even unmarried mothers. They make up 8.4 per cent of the total sample of 3,166 cases in the Summons Book, but from 1894 onwards they constituted more than 20 per cent of all cases coming to court. For the period of 1885–1888, out of a total of 375 cases, there are 39 involving female heads of household, representing 10.4 per cent of the sample, but half of the cases involved repeat offences—there are only 25 individual names. The high incidence of repeat offences for non-attendance amongst lone mothers suggests that, in their cases, the problem of non-attendance had become a chronic one. Possibly the authorities chose to concentrate only on those who repeatedly failed to heed warnings to get their children to school.

Evidence about the type of penalties imposed on widows and lone mothers suggests there were particular moral judgements at work in these cases. Table 1 shows that cases involving female-headed households had a higher than average conviction rate and were less likely to be fined (though more than half of cases involving lone mothers did still result in a fine). The lower incidence of fines must have been due to the patent inability of many women to pay fines, and thus magistrates preferred an attendance order which required monitoring of school attendance for a defined period (usually a month or six weeks) with a return to court if there was insufficient improvement. Fewer lone mothers

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27 The assumption that female heads of household were mainly widowed women is supported by the census analysis of the smaller sample for 1881 and 1891. Only one woman from those listed in those years as head of household was not designated as a widow on the census return.
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Table 1  Summary of penalties imposed by the court on parents for non-attendance in Coventry, 1874–1899

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of cases</th>
<th>Conviction rate %</th>
<th>Fines as % of convictions</th>
<th>Attendance orders as % of convictions</th>
<th>Industrial school as % of convictions</th>
<th>Withdrawn (i.e. not convicted)%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>3,166</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>63.8*</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male head of household</td>
<td>2,900</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>65.0*</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female head of household</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * The convictions plus withdrawals exceed 100% because some fathers were prosecuted for two or three truanting children at the same time and were then served with multiple fines or attendance orders.

had their cases withdrawn after adjournment, perhaps because they had already been given numerous chances to improve. On the other hand, their children were more likely to be sent to an industrial school as an outcome of a prosecution under the Education Acts. Industrial schools were residential schools for children referred by the courts for petty or first offences, or because of neglect or homelessness. Most industrial schools were in rural areas in order to separate the children from former influences and they were committed for several years (often to age 14 or 16). Removal to an industrial school was costly to the local authority and therefore only used for extreme cases. Possibly magistrates considered some of these mothers were unable to provide an adequate home for their children, through lack of income, lack of control over them or simply the burden of having too many children to care for alone. This bias in penalties signifies both moral and economic judgements by magistrates and the school board about the viability of the female-headed household. Widowhood or desertion usually resulted in a rapid descent into poverty and marginalisation, with little chance of recovery before the eldest children were of earning age. The increase nationally in committal of children to industrial schools for truancy between 1880 and 1900 was just one of the bitter fruits of a patriarchal system of justice in a period when poor law out-relief was being tightened up considerably, and the pressure of school fees was still a problem for these—the poorest—parents.28

Coventry School Board’s overall use of industrial schools to punish truancy, however, was modest. Only 36 Coventry children were committed to industrial school over the 25 year period 1874–1899. Typically they were boys aged 10–11. Thirteen of the children came from female-headed households, representing 36 per cent of the total. The consignment of successive children from the same family to industrial school occurred rarely, but usually in cases where the mother had moved house frequently, perhaps indicating to the magistrates that she could not maintain a stable family home for her children.

28 The Home Office, Annual reports of the chief inspector of reformatories and industrial schools, BPP 1880–1900.
Family reconstruction and the pattern of truancy over time: a comparison of families prosecuted in Coventry in 1881 and 1891

Using census information alongside the personal details in the Summons Book, it was possible to reconstruct the characteristics of a smaller group of families, whose heads were prosecuted for non-attendance in 1881 and 1891. These years were chosen as they coincide with the census and were likely to result in the maximum number of traceable cases on the enumerators’ forms. An electronic search of the relevant census unearthed information on each family: the parents’ ages and occupations, their places of birth and the characteristics of the neighbourhood in terms of occupational categories and type of housing. In relation to the child, the birth order and size of family were the major characteristics of interest. The number of individual families traced on the census was 163 in the 1881 sample and 81 in the 1891 sample. Only three families in each of the census years proved impossible to trace accurately in the census record, probably because they had moved into or out of Coventry between the census date and the prosecution. In all other cases, the family was identified using an online index, with supplementary checking at Coventry Local Studies Library.29

In both the 1881 and 1891 samples, a sizeable minority of parents was prosecuted more than once. While only 7 per cent were prosecuted again for the same child’s non-attendance within the year, if one extends the analysis to the end of the following year, the proportion prosecuted for the second or even third time rose to 21 per cent of the sample for 1881 and 22 per cent for 1891.30 This indicates the relative ineffectiveness of the penalties used by the local authorities and their lack of a deterrent effect for a significant minority of parents.

The 1881 and 1891 samples

The key data on the families prosecuted in 1881 and 1891 are shown in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 confirms a high degree of stability in the characteristics of the truanting children between the two dates. Though there were some very large families in the 1881 sample (including one with 9 children and another with 11) the mean number of children, at 4.6 for both 1881 and 1891, appears close to the average for working-class families in the period.31

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30 Belfiore, ‘Family strategies’, 279 claims 47 per cent of her Essex sample appeared in court more than once, but this was for up to 5 years after the first prosecution.
31 Szreter, Fertility, 312 and 344, shows fertility rates for artisans comparable to the watchmakers and silk weavers to be between 4.5 and 6 children, but these are mean completed family fertility rates so not directly comparable with the samples; A. McLaren, A history of contraception from antiquity to the present day (Oxford, 1990), 179, records the average number of children as 6.16 in couples marrying from 1861–1869 and 4.13 for those marrying 1890–1899 and the samples are in this range; Lancaster and Mason eds, Life and labour, 65, note that Coventry’s birth rate was ‘a few points’ higher than the national average from the 1880s onwards.
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The gender balance of those prosecuted remained the same at both dates. It is perhaps surprising to find more boys were being identified as truants, given the evidence that girls were more prone to absenteeism from school.32 Possibly the school board was reluctant to prosecute older girls who were fulfilling domestic duties at home as this was seen as a more ‘legitimate’ form of absence than the truancy of boys or younger girls.

Table 2  Summary of data on truants from samples of families, 1881 and 1891

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Av. family size</th>
<th>Boy truants</th>
<th>Girl truants</th>
<th>Av. age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nos.</td>
<td>% of total</td>
<td>Nos.</td>
<td>% of total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881 sample</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(163 cases)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891 sample</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(81 cases)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3  Summary of data on parents of truants from samples of families, 1881 and 1891

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Born in Coventry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fathers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881 sample</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(163 cases)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891 sample</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(81 cases)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:  A = Fathers in skilled trade; B = Mothers in paid work; C = Living at courtyard addresses.

The gender balance of those prosecuted remained the same at both dates. It is perhaps surprising to find more boys were being identified as truants, given the evidence that girls were more prone to absenteeism from school.32 Possibly the school board was reluctant to prosecute older girls who were fulfilling domestic duties at home as this was seen as a more ‘legitimate’ form of absence than the truancy of boys or younger girls.

Table 3 shows that most of the fathers were skilled workers at both dates. In 1881, these parents were predominantly working in watchmaking and silk weaving, the declining trades of Coventry.33 Persistent truancy was not therefore associated predominantly or even mostly with unskilled workers, though labourers do form a significant minority of those prosecuted. However, there were also parents listed as ‘master tailor’, ‘confectioner’ and ‘cabinet maker’, as well as one running a hat shop and another father recorded in the census as a ‘chemical experimentalist’, who was clearly from a middle-class background and by 1891 had become a factory manager. Similarly, the 1891 sample includes five parents who were employers or sole traders, and their addresses confirm that they were more affluent than the rest. Four of these ‘middle-class’ families were larger than the average, which may have made their children more prone to truancy from school than other shopkeepers’ families, especially where the mother was assisting in the family business and unable to supervise them as effectively.

32 Davin, Growing up, 102.
33 The differentiation between skilled and semi-skilled work in Coventry is problematic, given the dilution of craft status which was affecting both silk manufacture and watch-making at the time. Bicycle assembly
The population of Coventry was not a mobile one, and migration was very local with over 80 per cent of residents of Coventry born in the city itself or in the county of Warwickshire in the period 1871–1891.34 Data in Table 3 on the parents’ birthplaces confirms that the families of truants were ‘typical’ of the wider population, with the majority born in the city. Very few of the families in either 1881 or 1891 had moved away during the years of child-bearing, since most of their children were also born in the city. Table 3 shows that the participation of the mothers in the 1881 sample in paid work was significant. Most of the working mothers in both 1881 and 1891 were working in silk weaving, whatever their husbands’ occupations. Two-thirds of the wives of the silk weavers in the 1881 sample had occupations noted on the census, almost all of them in the supporting functions of winder, warper, and similar occupations. Nearly a third of watchmakers’ wives were also participating in the labour market, seemingly a high figure given the tradition that watchmakers’ wives did not undertake paid work.35 Evidence from earlier in the century links working mothers with fewer years of schooling for their children.36 A working mother might also be more likely to have truanting children, as they were less likely to be well supervised during the day. However, it is possible that some of these mothers were still working at least near to home in silk manufacture, since workshops were distributed throughout the central district and even in the crowded courtyards, where many of the truants’ parents lived.

The most significant change between the two samples of truanting families was a decline in the mothers’ employment over the decade 1881–1891. Although this reflected a general trend, in that the proportion of the female population in paid work in Coventry fell from 46 per cent of the employed population in 1861 to 31.8 per cent by 1901, the proportion of working mothers in the two samples declined much more steeply between 1881 and 1891.37 Table 3 shows that in the 1881 sample nearly 45 per cent (70) of mothers had an occupational status but in 1891 only 21 per percent (17) of the sample had one, two of them the wives of sole traders, assisting with the business. A plausible reason for this sharper decline in employment of mothers of school-age children might relate to the drop in opportunities for women’s domestic production in Coventry during the 1880s when silk manufacture in small workshops was replaced by factory work.38 New sectors such as cigar manufacture and factory-based silk production expanded over the period

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35 Pugh, VCH, 171.
36 J. Humphries, “‘Because they are too menny.’ Children, mothers and fertility decline: the evidence from working-class autobiographies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,” University of Oxford discussion papers in economic and social history, no. 64 (September 2006), 21, links working mothers with fewer years at school for their children in the pre-compulsory period.
37 Marson, ‘Coventry: urban geography’, 112.
38 Lancaster and Mason eds, Life and labour, 16.
but mostly attracted younger, unmarried, women, and therefore opportunities for working mothers probably fell even more than for women in general. Charring and cleaning—the usual resorts of working mothers—were not as widely available as an alternative in Coventry because its industrial sectors were dominated by small businesses, sole traders, and master craftsmen who lived only a little more comfortably than the men who worked for them. There was therefore a significant decline in work opportunities within or close to the home suitable for working mothers in the 1880s, and this decline seems to have had a major effect on the numbers of working mothers in the two samples ten years apart.

An additional explanation for the decline in working mothers listed could be that, in the 1891 census, enumerators were recording women’s paid employment on a less systematic basis and this affected the census records. While possible, such a change in recording is unlikely to have taken place in relation to silk weaving, as opposed to ‘household’ employment such as laundry work. The bulk of working mothers in both samples were working in silk manufacture and, in 1891, if they were still working in textiles they were more likely to be working outside the home in a factory than in 1881, and were therefore more likely to have their paid employment recorded in the census. Thus the census information is probably an accurate reflection of a difference in working patterns amongst the women in the two samples.

Table 3 also shows that the families in the 1881 sample, most of whom were headed by a skilled worker, lived mainly in the poorest type of housing in the yards behind the main streets in the centre of Coventry, a fact which exposes the intra-occupational differences of income and status which were not evident from the occupational labels in the census. A total of 66 per cent lived in the back-to-back houses in enclosed courtyards, while only 34 per cent lived at addresses fronting roads or streets. These proportions are not a measure of the extent of poverty amongst the families prosecuted, since some of the city centre streets in Coventry were also well known for their poor housing and tenements. However, the yard addresses were certain to be of poorer standard and stand as a good proxy for family poverty. While the decline in working mothers might suggest that the 1891 families were living in greater poverty than the 1881 sample because they did not have access to a mother’s income, the evidence about the type of housing the families occupied suggests the opposite—that the 1891 sample was not actually as poor as the families prosecuted a decade earlier. Although certain streets appear in both samples, a major shift was observed in the type of housing occupied by the families in the 1891 sample. Only 36 per cent of them lived at addresses in enclosed courtyards, whereas 64 per cent were recorded living on main streets or side roads. There was no significant slum clearance in Coventry between the two dates to account for this change.39

neighbourhoods for some of the streets were obviously as poor as any courtyard, but there was a significant difference in the occupational profile of several of the neighbourhoods included and of the parents who were prosecuted for truancy.

Several working in the bicycle industry lived in the new streets to the east of the city (see Figure 4, p. 30). Two fathers were journeymen carpenters living next door to each other: their sons had probably truanted together. Another, a bicycle worker, had a carpenter, hairdresser, butcher and church army captain as neighbours. Yet another lived close to the school attendance officer. This difference in addresses in the 1891 sample, taken together with the much lower incidence of working mothers, points to a shift in the status of those coming to the attention of the School Board. Even so, not a single parent prosecuted in the 1891 sample lived in the more select watchmakers’ district of Chapelfields. However, the prosecuted families in 1891 were spread more widely across Coventry, suggesting that the earlier policy of ‘truancy blitzes’ of certain poor areas of the city had given way to a more systematic pursuit of long-term or intermittent absentees using school attendance data. This still included the very poor, such as the lone mothers whose children may have been truanting to supplement family income or release the mother to work, but it hints also at the diversity of causation behind truancy, so that in 1891 poverty was not the major indicator of the likelihood of truancy, or prosecution for it, in Coventry.

Conclusions

The main findings of the work on this unique set of data confirm the link between poverty and truancy. Many of the city’s truants came from households headed by artisan workers trapped in insecure employment and living in poor-quality housing at the back of the main streets. Skipping school from time to time was a widespread practice in poorer districts and simply a matter of course for many working-class children from the narrow alleyways of Coventry’s packed city centre. The authorities’ approach was characterised by a ‘blitz’ on particular well-known poor neighbourhoods in the 1880s, but gradually enforcement took on a more systematic approach with families from across the city rather than just in the centre being prosecuted, presumably based on more accurate information about absentees from the schools. It is also possible that the reluctance of the poor to send their children to school had been largely overcome, and this would have been assisted by the ending of school fees in 1891.

The data shows that the School Board also concentrated progressively on the recalcitrant and repeat offenders, including lone mothers, in the 1890s. Poverty was an undercurrent to much of the non-attendance which reached the courts in Coventry, but essentially the authorities were dealing with the ordinary working population of the city, not simply the destitute and marginalised—though of course, some of the defendants were in this category both economically and socially. Family circumstances must have been crucial to the decisions of some parents to make calls on their children’s time or labour to support
the family at times of perceived need, especially the widows and lone mothers in the sample, but this was not the case for all of the families. Furthermore it was less the case in 1891, when the families involved in truancy seem to have been on average slightly better off in terms of their housing, and fewer of the mothers were working. For some of those who were prosecuted in 1891, it may have been more to do with parental attitude than poverty which led to persistent non-attendance.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the helpfulness of Coventry Archives staff in supporting my source work for this article.