

Devereux, Paul J.; Hart, Robert A.

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## Forced to be rich? returns to compulsory schooling in Britain

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IZA DP No. 3305

**Forced to Be Rich?  
Returns to Compulsory Schooling in Britain**

Paul J. Devereux  
Robert A. Hart

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# Forced to Be Rich? Returns to Compulsory Schooling in Britain

**Paul J. Devereux**

*University College Dublin,  
CEPR and IZA*

**Robert A. Hart**

*University of Stirling  
and IZA*

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IZA

P.O. Box 7240  
53072 Bonn  
Germany

Phone: +49-228-3894-0

Fax: +49-228-3894-180

E-mail: [iza@iza.org](mailto:iza@iza.org)

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## ABSTRACT

### Forced to Be Rich? Returns to Compulsory Schooling in Britain<sup>\*</sup>

Do students benefit from compulsory schooling? Researchers using changes in compulsory schooling laws as instruments have typically estimated very high returns to additional schooling that are greater than the corresponding OLS estimates and concluded that the group of individuals who are influenced by the law change have particularly high returns to education. That is, the Local Average Treatment Effect (LATE) is larger than the average treatment effect (ATE). However, studies of a 1947 British compulsory schooling law change that impacted about half the relevant population have also found very high instrumental variables returns to schooling (about 15%), suggesting that the ATE of schooling is also very high and higher than OLS estimates suggest. We utilize the New Earnings Survey Panel Data-set (NESPD), that has superior earnings information compared to the datasets previously used and find instrumental variable estimates that are small and much lower than OLS. In fact, there is no evidence of any positive return for women and the return for men is in the 4-7% range. These estimates provide no evidence that the ATE of schooling is very high.

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Corresponding author:

Paul J. Devereux  
School of Economics  
University College Dublin  
Belfield, Dublin 4  
Ireland  
E-mail: [devereux@ucd.ie](mailto:devereux@ucd.ie)

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## 1. Introduction

The return to compulsory schooling is an issue of fundamental importance to economists. Researchers using changes in compulsory schooling laws as instruments have typically estimated very high returns to additional schooling that are greater than the corresponding OLS estimates. Given that the first order source of bias in OLS is likely to be upward as more able individuals tend to obtain more education, such high estimates are usually rationalized as reflecting the fact that the group of individuals who are influenced by the law change have particularly high returns to education. That is, the Local Average Treatment Effect (LATE) is larger than the average treatment effect (ATE).

However, Oreopoulos (2006) examines a 1947 British compulsory schooling law change that impacted about half the relevant population (so the LATE may approximate the ATE) and finds very high IV returns to schooling (about 15%), suggesting that the ATE of schooling is greater than OLS estimates would suggest.<sup>1</sup> This constitutes a puzzle: How can the OLS return to schooling be a significantly downward biased estimate of the ATE when the primary source of OLS bias should be upward? We utilize a source of earnings data, the New Earnings Survey Panel Data-set (NESPD), that is superior to the datasets previously used and conclude that there is no such puzzle: the IV estimates are small and much lower than OLS.

There are additional reasons to doubt the very high earnings returns to schooling that have been found using the 1947 reform. While U.S. compulsory schooling laws have been found to influence a range of outcomes including mortality rates, health, probability

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<sup>1</sup> Other work by Oreopoulos (2007) and earlier work by Harmon and Walker (1995) finds similar estimates using the 1947 change in addition to other sources of identification.

of voting, criminal behaviour, fertility, and education of offspring (Lleras-Muney 2005; Milligan et al. 2004; Moretti and Lochner 2004; Black et al. 2008; Oreopoulos et al. 2006), researchers have struggled to find strong effects of the 1947 British reform on these types of outcomes (Clark and Royer 2007 for mortality; Milligan et al. 2004 for voting; Lindeboom et al. 2006 and Galindo-Rueda 2003 for intergenerational transmission).<sup>2</sup> Given we expect earnings to impact other behaviours and outcomes, we might expect a 15% return to schooling to lead to large impacts in many dimensions.

The NESPD dataset we use has several advantages. First, it covers the period from 1975 to 2001 and so contains earnings data that encompass large parts of the careers of cohorts impacted by the 1947 reform. In contrast, Harmon and Walker use a Family Expenditure Survey (FES) sample that runs from 1978 to 1986, and Oreopoulos (2006) uses the 1983-1998 survey years from the General Household Survey (GHS). Second, the NESPD is a large dataset that draws on a random 1% sample of the British population and allows a much larger sample than in previous research. Third, as it is a legal obligation on employers to complete the survey, and as it is based on the employer's payroll records, a high response rate is obtained and earnings information is likely to be much more accurate than self and proxy reports from household surveys. Fourth, the NESPD is a panel dataset and so if an individual is missed in any one year, for example due to unemployment, they are likely to be picked up in some other year. Thus, the coverage of the survey is potentially better than for household surveys that are repeated cross-sections.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Oreopoulos (2006) does find positive effects of the 1947 law change on self-reported health.

<sup>3</sup> The NESPD does not have any information on educational attainment. For this reason, we estimate the first stage relationship between the law change and schooling using the GHS.

The quality of the dataset enables us to use a Regression Discontinuity (RD) design in the analysis and obtain much more precise estimates than those obtained by Oreopoulos (2006) using this approach.<sup>4</sup> We find evidence that extra schooling modestly increases male earnings but there is no evidence that extra schooling increases earnings for women.

## **2. Analysing the 1947 Law Change**

### *Background*

In 1947 there was a major change in compulsory schooling laws in Britain with the minimum school leaving age increasing from 14 to 15. This change arose as a result of the 1944 Education Act that announced the raising of the school leaving age within three years. In 1947, Britain had a tripartite system of post-primary schooling composed of grammar schools, technical schools (which were quite rare), and (predominately) secondary modern schools. An exam at age 11, the 11 plus exam, allocated students amongst these schools with the highest scorers going to grammar schools and most of the rest going to secondary modern schools. All schooling types were free of charge as a result of the 1944 Education Act.

The increase in the minimum school leaving age to 15 was postponed until April 1<sup>st</sup> 1947 and implied that the first three years of secondary school become compulsory. While this provided an extra year of schooling, very few impacted children stayed in school until 16 to take state exams and acquire a credential. The change was accompanied by an increase in the number of teachers, buildings, and furniture to accommodate the

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<sup>4</sup> He finds IV estimates of .15 (.06) for all workers, and .15 (.13) for men using RD. These estimates are sufficiently imprecisely estimated to leave open the possibility of very small or very large returns to education.

rapidly increased student numbers and the pupil/teacher ratio remained quite stable over this period (see Clark and Royer 2007, Oreopoulos 2006, and Galindo-Rueda 2003 for further details about the reform).

The effect of the law change was that persons born before April 1933 faced a minimum school leaving age of 14, and persons born from April 1933 onwards faced a minimum age of 15. This reform had a very large impact on school leaving behaviour as can be seen in Figures 1 and 2 – the fraction leaving school before age 15 fell from over 60% for the 1932 cohort to about 10% for the 1934 cohort. Oreopoulos (2006) and Clark and Royer (2007) report similar impacts of the law change on schooling attainment.<sup>5</sup> Assuming that other cohort level factors that impact adult wages did not also systematically change for the 1933 cohort, we can identify schooling effects by comparing adult wages of persons born just before 1933 to those born during or just after.

### *Empirical Specification*

We estimate the relationships between the law change and our variables of interest (schooling, wages and earnings) using a regression discontinuity approach (see Imbens and Lemieux, 2007 and the references therein). The base specification regresses the particular outcome on a quartic function of year of birth and a dummy variable for the minimum school leaving age being 15. This global polynomial approach is a widely used approach to regression discontinuity analysis (Lee and Card 2006) and has been used to study the effects of the 1947 law change on mortality rates (Clark and Royer 2007). The quartic in cohort allows for smooth changes in outcomes over time and the effect of the

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<sup>5</sup> The fact that not everybody born after 1933 reports leaving school at age 15 or older can be ascribed to misreporting, individual non-compliance, and the fact that a few districts failed to provide sufficient school places for a while after the law was enacted.



law change is identified from the discontinuity in the law variable when the reform is implemented.<sup>6</sup>

Our unit of analysis is a year-of-birth cell. We reduce the micro-data to this level of aggregation by taking the means of all variables within each cell – obviously year of birth and the law variable are constant within cells. All subsequent regressions are weighted by the number of observations in each cell. Because schooling is unavailable in the NESPD, we use a two sample 2SLS approach to estimating the return to schooling. This is described in Section 4.

### *Interpreting the Effects of the Law Change*

Imbens and Angrist (1994) show that, under a monotonicity assumption, the IV estimator provides a Local Average Treatment Effect (LATE). In other words, it calculates the average effect of the treatment for compliers (individuals whose behaviour is changed by the instrument) only. In our case, the monotonicity assumption implies that the increase in the compulsory schooling age from 14 to 15 does not cause anyone who would have stayed until aged 15+ to now leave at age 14. The IV estimate provides no information about the returns to schooling for always-takers (people who would have stayed in school until at least age 15 irrespective of the legal rule) or never-takers (people who drop out before age 15 irrespective of the legal rule). In our case, both of these groups exist as almost 40% stayed until 15+ before the law change, and about 10% dropped out before age 15 after the law change. This means that, without extrapolation,

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<sup>6</sup> We use a quartic for consistency with Oreopoulos (2006). In practice, the estimates are very similar if a slightly lower or higher order polynomial is used. The visual impression from figures 3 – 6 is that the quartic function provides a good fit to the schooling and wage data. The results are also robust to varying the cohorts studied or allowing the slope of the regression function to differ before versus after the law change.

the LATE is uninformative about the ATE. However, as pointed out by Oreopoulos (2006), it is reasonable to suppose that as the number of compliers becomes an increasingly large proportion of the sample, the LATE should converge towards the ATE. Then, if the 1947 British reform (which affected about half the relevant population) provides a very high return to schooling, it would suggest that heterogeneous treatment effects are not a major issue and that the ATE is high and similar to the LATE.

### **3. Data**

#### *NESPD*

The New Earnings Survey Panel Dataset (NESPD) is comprised of a random sample of all individuals whose National Insurance numbers end in a given pair of digits. Each year a questionnaire is directed to employers, who complete it on the basis of payroll records for relevant employees. The questions relate to a specific week in April. Since the same individuals are in the sample each year, the NESPD is a panel data set and our extract runs from 1975 to 2001. Because National Insurance numbers are issued to all individuals who reach the minimum school leaving age, the sampling frame of the survey is a random sample of the population. Employers are legally required to complete the survey questionnaire so the response rate is very high. Also, individuals can be tracked from region to region and employer to employer through time using their National Insurance numbers.

However, not everyone in the sample frame is captured every year as questionnaires are sent to employers based on the employee's current tax record. Individuals may not have a current tax record if they have very recently changed jobs and the record has not been

updated, or if they do not earn enough to pay tax or National Insurance. In the analysis, we reduce the extent of these problems by giving each person equal weight irrespective of how frequently they appear in the 26-year panel. Later, we also do some analysis in which we investigate the impacts of missing out on some of the lowest paid workers in our base specifications. We find no evidence that this leads to any bias.

Since the data are taken directly from the employer's payroll records, the earnings and hours information in the NESPD are considered to be very accurate. The wage measure we use is "gross weekly earnings excluding overtime divided by normal basic hours for employees whose pay for the survey period was not affected by absence."<sup>7</sup> We also estimate weekly earnings specifications in which weekly earnings (including overtime) replace hourly standard rates. We deflate wages and earnings using the British Retail Price Index as it is Britain's most widely used price index and is similar to the U.S. Consumer Price Index (CPI). We drop cases for which hourly wage observations are less than £1 or more than £150 (in 2001 pounds).<sup>8</sup> Note that both full and part time workers are included in estimation. Part-time workers constitute only about 2% of the male sample but make up over 40% of the female sample. We have verified that omitting part time workers from the sample does not change the estimates to any large extent.

The sample includes individuals who are born between 1921 and 1945 – this provides 12 years before the 1933 reform and 12 years subsequent to 1933 -- and who are aged between 25 and 60. By 25 most Britons have completed education and capping the

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<sup>7</sup> Including overtime payments and taking account of overtime hours produced no substantive changes and so we confine attention to standard hourly rates throughout the paper.

<sup>8</sup> These exclusions are similar to those used by Card (1999). They imply the exclusion of 75 male observations (459 female) that have wages less than £1 and 54 male observations (0 female) that have wages greater than £150. To put these numbers in context, the minimum wage was £3.70 in 2001. We also exclude the small number of cases where weekly hours are greater than 84 (56 cases).

age at 60 limits the influence of early retirement.<sup>9</sup> Descriptive statistics for the sample are in Table 1.

### *GHS*

The General Household Survey (GHS) is a continuous national survey of people living in private households, conducted on an annual basis by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The GHS started in 1971 and has been carried out continuously since then, except for breaks in 1997-1998 when the survey was reviewed and 1999-2000 when it was redeveloped. We use the 1979-1998 GHS surveys in our analysis.<sup>10</sup> Being a household survey, the GHS is subject to non-response and reporting error. The response rates have varied over our sample period between a high of 85% in 1988 and a low of 72% in 1998. We use similar sample selection rules in the GHS as in the NESPD.

Unlike the NESPD, the GHS is not a panel but a set of repeated cross-sections. Also, it has information on schooling attainment that is not present in the NESPD. The variable we use is the age at which the person left school. This is appropriate for our purposes as we are estimating the value of an extra year spent at school (as distinct from the value of going to college or doing a PhD).<sup>11</sup>

The weekly earnings data in the GHS are probably inferior to those in the NESPD due to mis-reporting, non-response, and changes over time in the exact definition of

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<sup>9</sup> Many low skilled people quit working before age 65 in Britain – Banks and Blundell (2005) show that, in the 1980-2000 period, the employment rate of men aged 60-64 is only about 40%. In Section 5 below, we show that our results are robust to tightening the age requirements even further.

<sup>10</sup> We exclude the pre-1979 surveys from the analysis as earnings are measured very differently in this early period, referring to the year preceding the survey rather than to earnings in the week preceding the interview. We exclude post 1998 surveys as no survey was held in 1999 and the survey was relaunched in 2000 with a different design.

<sup>11</sup> While there is also a measure of age when the person completed education, it is not very reliable as there appear to be many cases where people add some education after long absences from the system.

earnings. We construct an hourly earnings variable using information on usual weekly earnings and usual weekly hours. One drawback is that the earnings information includes overtime earnings but the hours variable excludes overtime hours. Despite this problem, we report estimates using the hourly wage variable in addition to weekly earnings.<sup>12</sup>

Descriptive statistics for the sample are in Table 1.

## 4. Results

### A. OLS Estimates Using the GHS

The NESPD has no information about years of schooling so we require another data source to estimate the OLS relationship between schooling and wages and the first stage relationship between the law change and schooling. Following some recent literature, we use the General Household Survey (GHS) for this purpose.<sup>13</sup> The OLS specification uses individual-level data and regresses log wages (earnings) on age left school, a quartic in cohort, and a full set of age dummies. For comparability with the NESPD sample, we include immigrants and exclude the self-employed. There are 29,217 observations for men and 26,934 observations on women. For hourly wages, the coefficient on age left school is .140 (.002) for men and .165 (.002) for women. For weekly earnings, the analogous coefficients are .134 (.002) and .194 (.004) for men and women respectively. These are large “returns” and suggest that either the value of an additional year in school is very high for these cohorts or there is a lot of selection in

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<sup>12</sup> Manning (2000) also uses this variable and shows that it is highly correlated with the true hourly wage (correlation=.98) because average overtime hours are relatively short (less than 3 per week) and because overtime hours are very weakly correlated with hourly earnings.

<sup>13</sup> An alternative would be the Family Expenditure Survey (FES). We have chosen not to use it as the FES does not have information on year of birth (just age), does not have information on country of birth, and also has only about a 60% response rate.

terms of who leaves school early.<sup>14</sup> The analysis using the change in the compulsory schooling law is designed to differentiate between these two explanations.

### *B. First Stage from GHS*

Because the cohorts impacted by the law are those born after April 1 1933, approximately 3/4 of the 1933 cohort is impacted by the reform. Given that we observe birth year but not birth month, we define the law variable as being equal to zero for persons born before 1933 and one otherwise. We also explore the robustness of our estimates to allowing the law to have a different impact for the 1933 cohort (who are partially affected) than for subsequent cohorts (who are fully impacted).

In the NESPD, we know year of birth. In the GHS, year of birth is reported in surveys carried out from 1986 onwards.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, 1986 is too late a starting year for the analysis as individuals born in 1921 are aged 65 in that year. Therefore, we use the GHS surveys starting from 1979 to estimate a first stage relationship. In the 1979 to 1985 GHS, we impute year of birth using information on age, survey year, and survey month.<sup>16</sup> As discussed above, the base specification regresses age left school on a quartic function of cohort and a dummy variable for the minimum school leaving age being 15. We reduce the micro-data to 25 year-of-birth cells by taking the means of all variables within each cohort and weight all regressions by the number of observations in each cell. More formally, using the GHS, we estimate the following equation:

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<sup>14</sup> These OLS estimates are possibly so high because they are estimated from variation in the lower tail of the education distribution – age left school will not vary much between college degree holders and people who finish school but do not go to college.

<sup>15</sup> Year of birth is also available for women aged 16-49 in the 1983-1985 surveys and we use this information where available.

<sup>16</sup> We impute year of birth as being (survey year – age) for persons who are interviewed between July and December, and as being (survey year – age – 1) for persons interviewed between January and June.

$$SCH_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 1(YOB \geq 1933)_i + f\{YOB_i\} + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where  $i$  indexes cohort,  $SCH$  is age left school,  $YOB$  is year of birth,  $1(\cdot)$  is the indicator function, and  $f\{YOB_i\}$  is a quartic function of year-of-birth.

For comparability with the NESPD sample, we restrict the GHS sample to persons aged between 25 and 60 who are members of the 1921 to 1945 cohorts. The NESPD sample includes only persons who work either full-time or part-time and excludes the self-employed. For consistency with the NESPD sample exclusions, we report first stage regressions for the sample of employed individuals who are not self-employed and who work between 1 and 84 hours a week. Note that even though the GHS has country of birth indicators, we have not restricted the sample to British-born persons because we cannot impose this restriction in the NESPD.

The first stage estimates are presented in column (1) of Table 2. The effect of the law is to increase the average school leaving age by .37 of a year for men and .46 of a year for women and these are both strongly statistically significant. While not reported in the table, the law reduced the proportion who finished school at 14 or younger by .41 (.05) for men and .42 (.05) for women.<sup>17</sup> Figures 1 to 4 below display the estimates graphically (we exclude immigrants when drawing the figures). The polynomial fits in these figures are created using the baseline specification of a quartic in cohort. The break in 1933 is very clear.

Note also that the first stage coefficients are very robust to the specification used. For example, Appendix Table 1 shows estimates when cohort-age cells are used instead

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<sup>17</sup> The effects of the law are strongly concentrated at age 14 – 15. The effect of the law on probability finish by age 15 is -.030 (.012) for men and -.046 (.020) for women. The equivalent figures for age 16 are small and statistically insignificant -- .010 (.005) for men and .005 (.009) for women.

of cohort cells, allowing the inclusion of age controls. Adding age to the specification has little impact. The first stage estimates are also very similar irrespective of the exact sample used – i.e. varying the age ranges of respondents, the exact years in the GHS used, excluding or including the non-employed and the self-employed etc. So, it does appear that our GHS sample provides a reliable first stage.

### *C. Reduced Form Effects on Hourly Wages and Weekly Earnings*

The reduced form specification regresses wages (or earnings) on a quartic function of cohort and a dummy variable for the minimum school leaving age being 15. Specifically,

$$\ln Y_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 1(YOB \geq 1933)_i + f\{YOB_i\} + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

where  $i$  indexes cohort,  $Y$  is the hourly wage,  $YOB$  is year of birth,  $1(\cdot)$  is the indicator function, and  $f\{YOB_i\}$  is a quartic function of year-of-birth.

The baseline reduced form estimates from the NESPD are in column (3) of Table 2 (Panel A for hourly wages and Panel B for weekly earnings). The results differ between men and women. For men, the reduced form estimate of the effect of the law change on log wages is .021 (.005) so the law increases wages by about 2%. For women, the estimate is a statistically insignificant .001 (.008), suggesting very small effects of the law change. Column (3) in Panel B includes analogous estimates for log weekly earnings (including overtime) and these are very similar to the wage estimates.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The reduced form effects are almost identical when we use median wages or earnings in the cohort cell rather than mean earnings as the dependent variable (for men reduced form effects are .022 (.008) and .017 (.008) for wages and earnings respectively; for women the equivalent numbers are -.0006 (.007) and .011 (.017)). This indicates that our estimates are not being strongly impacted by outliers.



Figures 5 and 6 display the wage estimates graphically. For men, there is a clear break in the series in 1933. For women, it is equally clear that there is no break in the series in 1933.

#### *D. Two Sample Two Stage Least Squares*

Given that the first stage and reduced form regressions come from different datasets, it is not possible to do conventional Two Stage Least Squares (2SLS) to estimate the return to an extra year in school. Instead we use Two Sample Two Stage Least Squares (TS2SLS) (Angrist and Krueger 1992; Inoue and Solon 2006). This is implemented by forming the predicted value of schooling using the first stage coefficients estimated in the GHS and the actual explanatory variables from the NESPD. We then use the NESPD to regress the log wage on the predicted value of schooling and the usual explanatory variables.

Note that because we have one instrument and our specification is just identified, the TS2SLS estimator is simply the reduced form effect of the law divided by the first stage effect.<sup>19</sup> That is, using the estimates from equations (1) and (2), the estimated return to schooling is  $\hat{\beta}_1 = \hat{\gamma}_1 / \hat{\alpha}_1$ .

The estimates are in column (5) of Table 2. As suggested by the reduced forms, the return to schooling is essentially zero for women but positive for men. The size of the effect for men is .057, implying that an extra year of schooling increases wages by about 5 or 6%.

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<sup>19</sup> In calculating the TS2SLS standard errors, we use the delta method to allow for the fact that the predicted value of schooling contains sampling error.

### *E. Allowing Effect of Law to Differ for 1933 Cohort*

In Table 2, we also report estimates in which there are two exogenous variables of interest – a dummy for whether the person is a member of the 1933 cohort, and a dummy for coming from a subsequent cohort. As expected, the first stage effect is smaller for the first dummy than for the second. The coefficient on the second dummy, which can be interpreted as the effect of the law fully implemented, is .42 for men and .51 for women. As can be seen in column (6), when we include the dummy for coming from a post-33 cohort as the only excluded instrument, the TS2SLS estimates are similar to those using just the Law = 1 dummy as instrument, suggesting that the exact specification used for the law change is not critical. The estimates (unreported) are also very similar when we do not include the dummy for whether the person is a member of the 1933 cohort in the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage. Given the similarities, we report only the estimates using the single law change variable in subsequent tables.

## **5. Robustness Checks**

### *Allowing For Age Effects*

Given the life-cycle pattern of earnings, it is possible that adding age controls might matter. In Appendix Table 1, we report estimates from specifications that group the individual-level data by cohort-age and include age controls. However, both reduced form and TS2SLS estimates are very little impacted by the addition of controls for a quadratic in age, or by the inclusion of a full set of age dummies. This can be seen in columns (4) to (9) in Appendix Table 1.

### *Restricting the Sample to Persons aged 35-50*

Haider and Solon (2006) show using U.S. data that current income is a reasonable proxy for lifetime income for men aged between their early 30s and late 40s. For this reason (and because in Britain many men retire before age 60), we have checked the robustness of our results to restricting the NESPD sample to men aged between 35 and 50. Note that this age restriction implies that the cohorts followed are now born between 1925 and 1945. The TS2SLS estimates for men fall to .03 (.04) for wages and .01 (.05) for earnings. Thus, the finding of a modest return to additional compulsory schooling is, if anything, strengthened when the sample is restricted to ages in which current earnings are likely to be a good proxy for permanent earnings.

For women, it is less clear which ages provide the most representative earnings due to the issues raised by childbearing and childcare. However, in any case, the estimates for women in the 35-50 age group are -.001 (.03) for wages and .02 (.05) for earnings. These are very similar to the estimates for the broader age range.

### *Undersampling of Low-Paid in NESPD*

The NESPD under-samples individuals who earn less than the PAYE tax threshold in Britain and so are not subject to tax. The threshold has varied over time between £675 per year in 1975 and £4535 per year in 2001. To assess the extent of this problem, we compare the proportion of observations in the NESPD sample that are under the threshold to the equivalent figure from the GHS sample. For men, there are fewer than 1% of these observations in either sample so it is not a relevant issue. For women, the proportions are 27% in the GHS and 18% in the NESPD (once we give each

individual the same weight). We have tried reweighting the regressions to get some sense as to what biases might arise. To do so, we gave a weight of 1.5 to observations in the NESPD that were below the tax threshold and a weight of 2/3 to observations that are above the threshold. This exercise had very little effect on the estimates – the reduced form effect of the law on the log wage for women remained at .001 (.007) and the equivalent estimate for log earnings fell to .003 (.018). Thus, all indications suggest that this is not a big issue.

A more fundamental selection problem is that we only observe wages for individuals who work and the law may systematically impact employment probabilities. Interestingly, we find that there is a small but statistically significant negative effect of the law on employment in the GHS for both men and women. This is not just an early retirement effect as it is also present when the sample is restricted to persons aged 35-50. Assuming that the non-employed would tend to have lower wages if they worked, this suggests that our estimates may, if anything, be biased upwards due to this type of selection.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Inclusion of Immigrants in NESPD*

There is no information about place of birth in the NESPD and so our sample includes both British-born and immigrants. Since immigrants may not have gone through the British schooling system, ideally the sample would be restricted to British-born. One nice feature of the GHS is that it has information on country of birth. In Table 1, we see

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<sup>20</sup> There is no evidence of differential mortality or emigration arising as a result of the law change (Clark and Royer 2007) so we can rule out the possibility of selection bias due to these factors.

that only about 8% of the GHS sample are immigrants.<sup>21</sup> In Table 3, we go further and compare GHS estimates from the British-born sample to those from a sample that includes foreign born people as well (like the NESPD). Given the small percentage of our cohorts that are born abroad and the fact that immigration is unlikely to be systematically related to compulsory schooling laws, one would not expect large biases in 2SLS estimates resulting from contamination by immigration. However, one would expect the first stage estimates to be lower when foreign-born persons are included in the sample.

The estimates are in Table 3. Initially we restrict the GHS sample to employees as the NESPD sample excludes the self-employed. Comparing column (1) to column (2), we see that the first stage relationship between the law and schooling increases modestly when immigrants are excluded (from .41 to .45 for men and from .46 to .48 for women).<sup>22</sup> Columns (4) and (5) show the analogous reduced form estimates and indicate that, if anything, excluding immigrants reduces the effects of the law on wages and earnings a little and the 2SLS estimates in columns (7) and (8) tell the same story. There clearly is no evidence that the NESPD estimates are biased down as a result of some immigrants being present in the sample and this provides another reason to have confidence in the NESPD results in Table 2. Interestingly, the GHS estimates are broadly similar to those we found using the NESPD but the standard errors are generally higher.

#### *Exclusion of Self-Employed from NESPD*

One can also examine whether the GHS estimates are different when the self-employed are included. These results are in columns (6) and (9) in Table 3. Including the

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<sup>21</sup> We have calculated a similar percentage for these cohorts using the British Labour Force Survey.

<sup>22</sup> The first stage coefficients are slightly different from those in Table 2 because there is an additional sample restriction here that persons must have a wage observation.

self-employed tends to increase the size of the estimates but not to any large extent. The small change reflects the fact that the self-employed constitute only about 12% of the GHS sample. Also, we have verified that the law variable has no significant effect on the probability that an individual is self-employed for either men or women in the GHS sample. Including the self-employed does tend to reduce the precision of the estimates and this presumably reflects the greater variance of earnings and hours of the self-employed and the likelihood that these variables are measured more poorly for this group.<sup>23</sup>

## **6. Reconciling Estimates with the Literature**

There are many studies that report estimates of the return to schooling using compulsory schooling laws. For example, Angrist and Krueger (1991) and Oreopoulos (2006) for the U.S., Black et al. (2005) for Norway, Grenet (2005) for France, and Pischke and von Wachter (2005) for Germany. The U.S. estimates are similar or higher than OLS but the estimates from the three papers using European data are all lower than OLS and sometimes very low – Pischke and von Wachter report estimates suggesting zero returns to schooling in Germany. As these authors point out, the German and British school systems had much in common at the time of the increase in compulsory schooling. Also, as in Britain, in Germany a large proportion of the relevant population was impacted by the law changes. Thus, our estimates of low returns are entirely consistent with their findings. We now turn to the British literature.

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<sup>23</sup> We have also tried restricting the age range to 35-50 in the GHS as we did with the NESPD. The resultant 2SLS wage estimates that are equivalent to column (9) in Table 3 are .02 (.05) and .02 (.04) for men and women respectively; the respective earnings estimates are .01 (.05) and -.06 (.07).

Harmon and Walker (1995) were pioneers in the use of compulsory schooling law changes to estimate the return to education. They use both the 1947 law and a subsequent 1973 law change for identification. They study men only and report returns to schooling of 15 percent, far above their OLS estimate. Their paper has been criticised by Oreopoulos (2006) and by Pischke and von Wachter (2005) because of its failure to adequately control for cohort effects -- they include survey year dummies and a quadratic in age but no controls for cohort (although the linear age variable is in effect a linear cohort variable given they control for survey year). Also, because they use the later 1973 law change that impacted a much smaller proportion of the population, their LATE estimates are not directly comparable to ours. Given all the differences in approach, it is not surprising that our estimates are different from theirs.

Recently Oreopoulos (2006) studies the 1947 law change using GHS files from 1983-1998. His sample includes British-born individuals born between 1921 and 1951 who were aged between 32 and 64 at the time of the survey. He provides both differences-in-differences (DD) and regression discontinuity (RD) evidence. The DD specifications control for a quartic in cohort (cohort dummies in some specifications) and a Northern Ireland (NI) dummy and exploit the fact that the school leaving age was raised later in NI than in the rest of the UK. The DD approach assumes that the cohort effects are the same in Britain and NI and this may be a strong assumption given that Northern Ireland is a unique place with its issues of religious discrimination that do not apply to the rest of the UK.<sup>24</sup> So, our estimates may differ from his DD estimates because of the different identifying assumptions used. While attitudes to identifying assumptions are

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<sup>24</sup> Also, Figure 9 in his paper shows that cohort-level changes in earnings appear to often diverge between Britain and Northern Ireland, even in years when there are no changes in compulsory schooling laws, potentially invalidating the DD assumption that cohort effects are the same in both regions.

necessarily subjective, we do not find this approach as compelling as the RD design using British data alone.<sup>25</sup>

Oreopoulos (2006) also uses an RD approach using Britain alone and finds IV estimates for earnings of .15 (.06) for all workers, and .15 (.13) for men. It is puzzling that our RD estimates using the GHS are very different from his. Oreopoulos kindly shared his programs with us and when we used them in conjunction with the GHS data we downloaded from the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS), we obtained estimates of .08 (.06) for all workers using his GHS survey years.<sup>26</sup> When we expand the sample period to 1979-98, the estimate for all workers changes to .05 (.05). When we split by sex, the estimate for men is 8% and that for women is slightly negative. These are entirely consistent with our GHS estimates in Table 3 and suggest that the remaining differences in our sample restrictions and variable definitions are not so important in determining the estimates obtained.

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<sup>25</sup> It is clear from his paper that Oreopoulos (2006) also considers the RD approach to be particularly compelling.

<sup>26</sup> Given that we are using the same code, we do not understand the source of the difference between this number and the .15 reported in his paper. Unfortunately, he no longer has his raw data files so we have not been able to examine this further. Our contacts in the ESDS have verified that the names of many of the GHS datafiles were changed in 2002, but are unaware of any change to the datasets themselves.



## 7. Conclusions

The 1947 change in the British compulsory schooling law has enabled us to estimate the returns to extra schooling for men and women in a situation where about half the population leave school at the earliest possible age. We find no evidence of any wage or earnings return for women and our preferred estimates suggest a modest return of 5 or 6% for men.

The returns to schooling we find are significantly below comparable OLS estimates of about 15% for men and women. If our estimates are picking up something close to the average treatment effect in the population, then the ATE is much lower than the OLS estimate. This is consistent with the fact that more able children tend to obtain more schooling so that OLS is biased upwards. It also suggests that large estimates found using other compulsory schooling law changes that impacted the schooling of much fewer people may be picking up very high returns to schooling for the small number of compliers.

Our estimates also may help explain the puzzle of why half the British population dropped out of school as early as they could given the returns to schooling are apparently so high. One simple explanation is that the returns to additional schooling were actually quite low for this group and it was rational to leave school early. While it is difficult to quantify the costs of an extra year of schooling, this story is certainly consistent with our results for women in this paper.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

**NESPD (1975 - 2001)**

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Survey Year	1219398	82.71	6.42	75	101
Cohort	1219398	33.43	7.27	21	45
Female	1219398	0.44	0.50	0	1
Age	1219398	48.28	7.29	29	60
Hours Worked	1219398	34.03	9.04	1	84
Log (Hourly Wage)	1219398	1.94	0.49	0.00	5.01
Log (Weekly Earnings)	1219398	5.47	0.71	0.32	8.82
Law mandates school until 15	1219398	0.54	0.50	0	1

These are weighted means with the weights being the inverse of the number of times the individual is in the sample. In total, there are 145883 individuals who are sampled an average of 8.36 times.

**General Household Survey (1979 – 1998)**

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Survey Year	72523	85.54	5.07	79	98
Cohort	72523	36.12	6.49	21	45
Female	72523	0.44	0.50	0	1
Age	72523	49.00	6.57	33	60
British Born	72523	0.92	0.27	0	1
Employee	72523	0.88	0.33	0	1
Hours Worked	72523	35.82	13.24	1	84
Log (Hourly Wage)	61549	1.86	0.58	0.00	4.97
Log (Weekly Earnings)	61549	5.32	0.85	0.08	8.99
Age Left School	72523	15.34	1.27	10	24
Left School by age 14	72523	0.24	0.43	0	1
Left School by age 15	72523	0.67	0.47	0	1
Law mandates school until 15	72523	0.71	0.46	0	1

Table 2: Estimated Effect of an extra year of schooling on Hourly Wages and Weekly Earnings

Panel A: Hourly Wages		First Stage		Reduced Form		TS2SLS	
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<b>Men</b>	Law = 1	.369*		.021*			
		(.060)		(.005)			
	Cohort = 1933		.310*		.020*		
			(.040)		(.004)		
	Cohort > 1933		.423*		.022*		
			(.053)		(.007)		
	Schooling (Instrument: Law = 1)					.057*	
						(.016)	
	Schooling (Instrument: Cohort > 1933)						.051*
							(.018)
<b>Women</b>	Law = 1	.455*		.001			
		(.053)		(.008)			
	Cohort = 1933		.402*		.002		
			(.029)		(.007)		
	Cohort > 1933		.505*		-.0002		
			(.045)		(.011)		
	Schooling (Instrument: Law = 1)					.002	
						(.018)	
	Schooling (Instrument: Cohort > 1933)						-.0004
							(.021)

First Stage regressions are based on 25 cohort cells for men and 25 cohort cells for women from the GHS. Reduced Form regressions are based on 25 cohort cells for men and 25 cohort cells for women from the NESPD. All regressions are weighted by cell size and include a quartic function of year-of-birth.

TS2SLS is Two Sample Two Stage Least Squares.

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

\* denotes statistically significant at the 5% level.

Schooling (Instrument: Law = 1) is the specification where the instrument is the dummy variable 1(Law = 1).

Schooling (Instrument: Cohort > 1933) is the specification where the instrument is the dummy variable 1(Cohort > 1933). In column (6), 1(Cohort = 1933) is included as a control variable.

There are 33978 male observations and 29567 female observations used in the GHS.

There are 718120 male observations (on 81461 men) and 501278 female observations (on 64422 women) used in the NESPD.

Table 2: Estimated Effect of an extra year of schooling on Hourly Wages and Weekly Earnings

Panel B: Weekly Earnings		First Stage		Reduced Form		TS2SLS	
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<b>Men</b>	Law = 1	.369*		.021*			
		(.060)		(.006)			
	Cohort = 1933		.310*		.023*		
			(.040)		(.004)		
	Cohort > 1933		.423*		.019*		
			(.053)		(.007)		
	Schooling (Instrument: Law = 1)					.057*	
						(.018)	
	Schooling (Instrument: Cohort > 1933)						.045*
							(.017)
<b>Women</b>	Law = 1	.455*		.007			
		(.053)		(.015)			
	Cohort = 1933		.402*		.017		
			(.029)		(.011)		
	Cohort > 1933		.505*		-.003		
			(.045)		(.017)		
	Schooling (Instrument: Law = 1)					.015	
						(.032)	
	Schooling (Instrument: Cohort > 1933)						-.005
							(.034)

First Stage regressions are based on 25 cohort cells for men and 25 cohort cells for women from the GHS. Reduced Form regressions are based on 25 cohort cells for men and 25 cohort cells for women from the NESPD. All regressions are weighted by cell size and include a quartic function of year-of-birth.

TS2SLS is Two Sample Two Stage Least Squares.

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

\* denotes statistically significant at the 5% level.

Schooling (Instrument: Law = 1) is the specification where the instrument is the dummy variable 1(Law = 1).

Schooling (Instrument: Cohort > 1933) is the specification where the instrument is the dummy variable 1(Cohort > 1933). In column (6), 1(Cohort = 1933) is included as a control variable.

There are 33978 male observations and 29567 female observations used in the GHS.

There are 718120 male observations (on 81461 men) and 501278 female observations (on 64422 women) used in the NESPD.

Table 3: Estimated Effect of an extra year of schooling on Wages and Earnings (GHS)

	First Stage			Reduced Form			Two Stage Least Squares		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Hourly Wages									
Men	.411*	.447*	.426*	.015	.011	.020	.037	.025	.047
	(.055)	(.062)	(.051)	(.009)	(.008)	(.014)	(.020)	(.018)	(.029)
Women	.460*	.480*	.481*	.016	.011	.017	.035*	.023	.036
	(.060)	(.065)	(.068)	(.008)	(.009)	(.011)	(.016)	(.019)	(.019)
Weekly Earnings									
Men	.411*	.447*	.426*	.028*	.026*	.028*	.069*	.058*	.066*
	(.041)	(.062)	(.051)	(.009)	(.010)	(.012)	(.025)	(.022)	(.024)
Women	.460*	.480*	.481*	.017	.002	.005	.037	.005	.011
	(.043)	(.065)	(.068)	(.025)	(.023)	(.021)	(.050)	(.047)	(.043)
Immigrants included	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
Employees only	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No

First stage, reduced-form, and 2SLS regressions are based on 25 cohort cells for men and 25 cohort cells for women. All regressions are weighted by cell size and include a quartic function of year-of-birth.

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

\* denotes statistically significant at the 5% level.

There are 29217 men and 26934 women used in columns (1), (4), and (7).

There are 27016 men and 24876 women used in columns (2), (5), and (8).

There are 30800 men and 26039 women used in columns (3), (6), and (9).



Appendix Table 1: Estimated Effect of an extra year of schooling on Wages and Earnings (Grouping into Cohort-Age Cells)

	First Stage: Effect of Law on Age Left School			Reduced Form: Effect of Law on Wages/Earnings			TS2SLS: Effect of Schooling on Wages/Earnings		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Hourly Wages									
Men	.369* (.054)	.369* (.054)	.360* (.055)	.021* (.004)	.021* (.004)	.020* (.005)	.056* (.014)	.057* (.014)	.057* (.016)
Women	.455* (.048)	.454* (.047)	.451 (.049)	-.001 (.007)	.001 (.007)	.001 (.007)	-.002 (.015)	.002 (.014)	.002 (.015)
Weekly Earnings									
Men	.369* (.054)	.369* (.054)	.360* (.055)	.020* (.004)	.020* (.005)	.019* (.005)	.056* (.015)	.054* (.015)	.052* (.017)
Women	.455* (.048)	.454* (.047)	.451 (.049)	.005 (.013)	.004 (.013)	.004 (.013)	.010 (.028)	.010 (.028)	.010 (.028)
Birth Cohort Controls	Quartic	Quartic	Quartic	Quartic	Quartic	Quartic	Quartic	Quartic	Quartic
Age Controls	None	Quadratic	Age Dummies	None	Quadratic	Age Dummies	None	Quadratic	Age Dummies

First stage regressions are based on 380 cohort-age cells for men and 381 cohort-age cells for women from the GHS. Reduced form estimates are based on 485 cohort-age cells for both genders from the NESPD. All regressions are weighted by cell size.

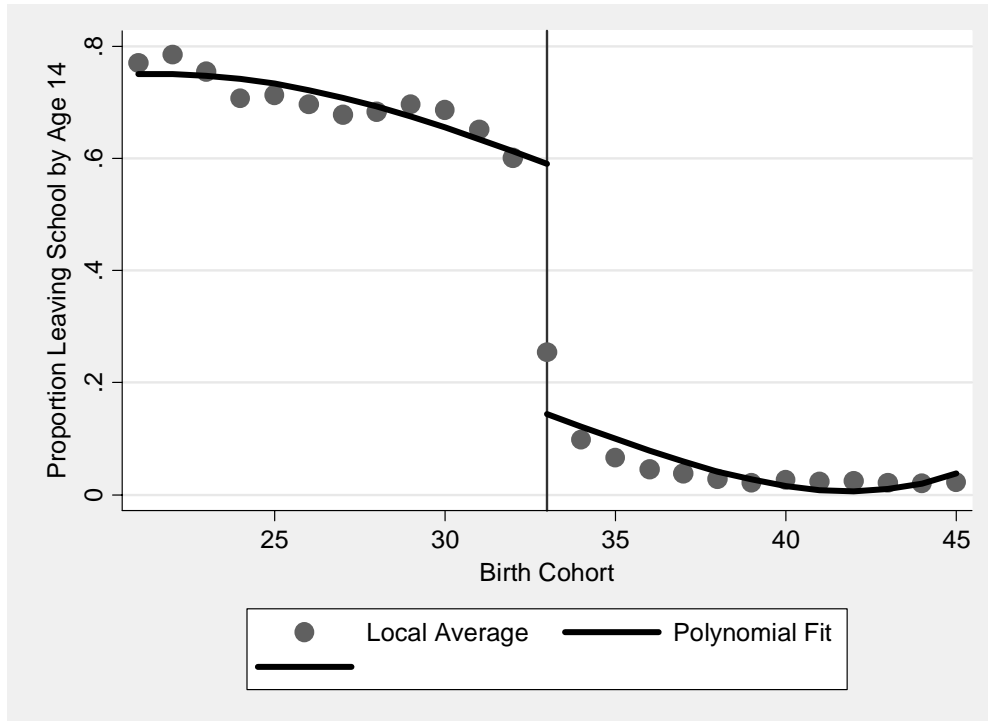
TS2SLS is Two Sample Two Stage Least Squares.

Standard errors are clustered by birth cohort so there are 25 clusters.

\* denotes statistically significant at the 5% level.

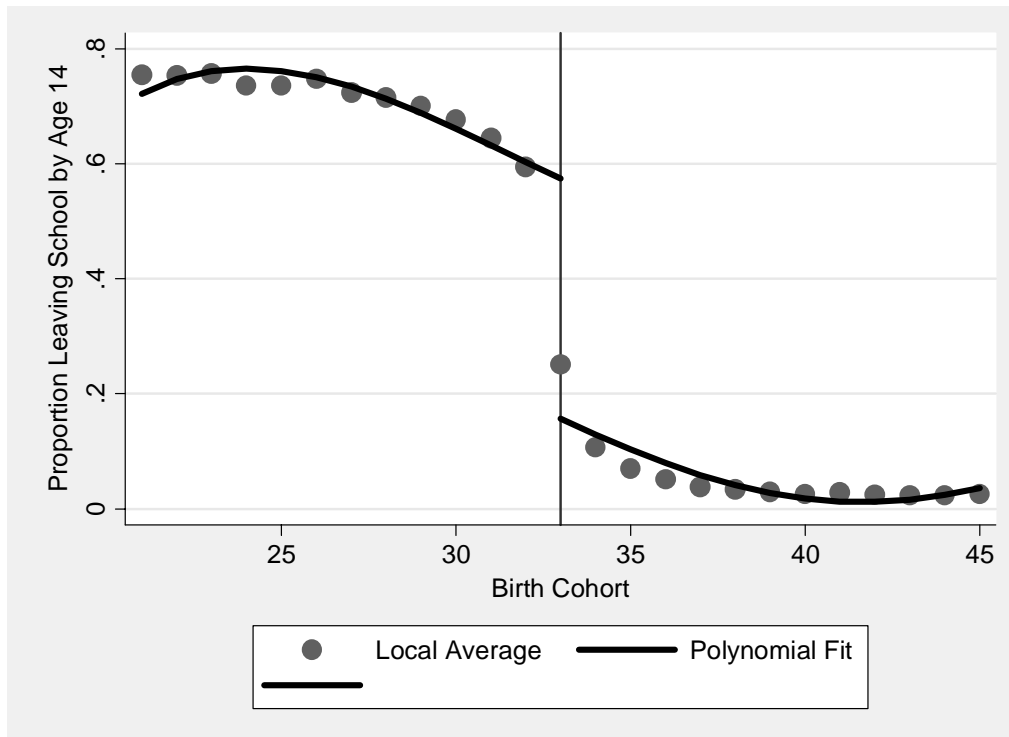
There are 33978 male observations and 29567 female observations used in the GHS. There are 718120 male observations (on 81461 men) and 501278 female observations (on 64422 women) used in the NESPD.

Figure 1: Proportion of Women Leaving School by Age 14 (GHS)



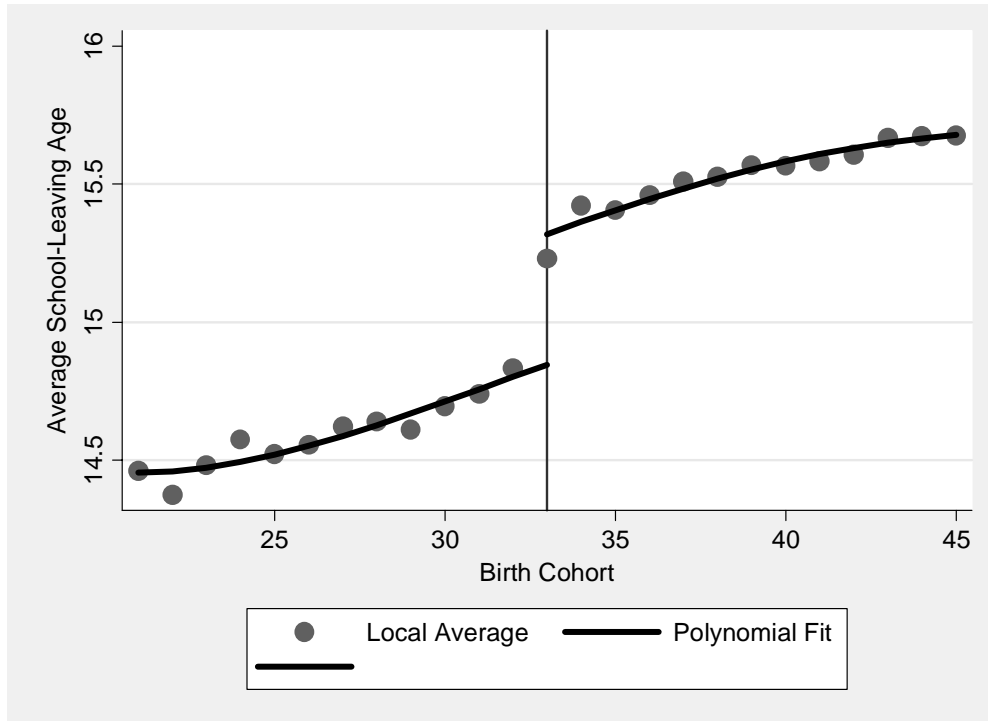
Vertical Line indicates change in school leaving age from 14 to 15

Figure 2: Proportion of Men Leaving School by Age 14 (GHS)



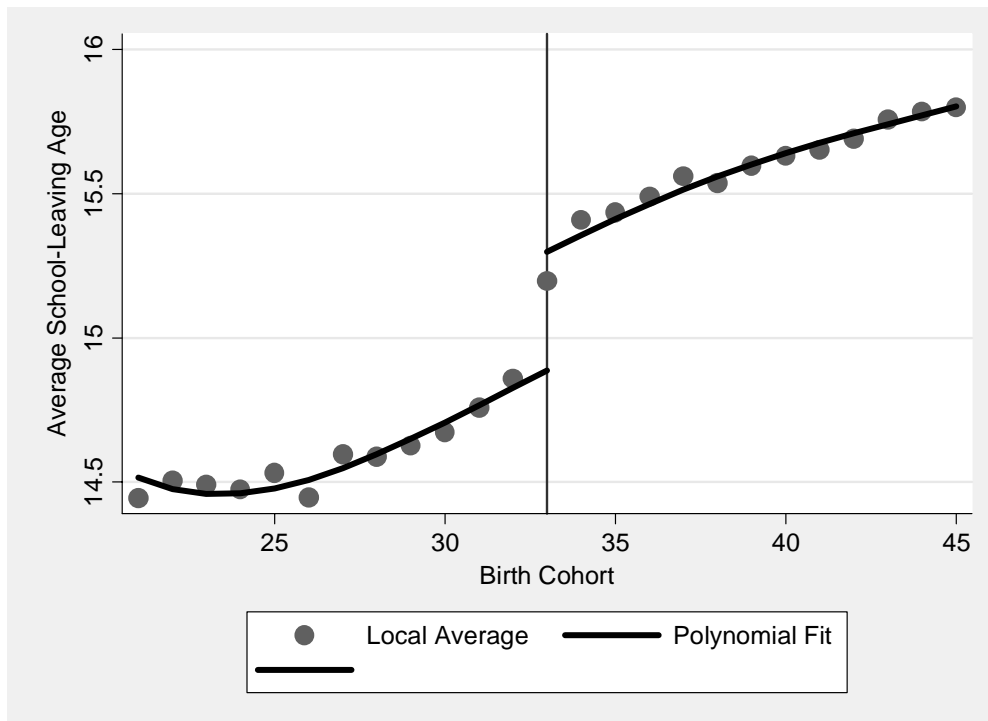
Vertical Line indicates change in school leaving age from 14 to 15

Figure 3: Average School Leaving Age by Cohort for Women (GHS)



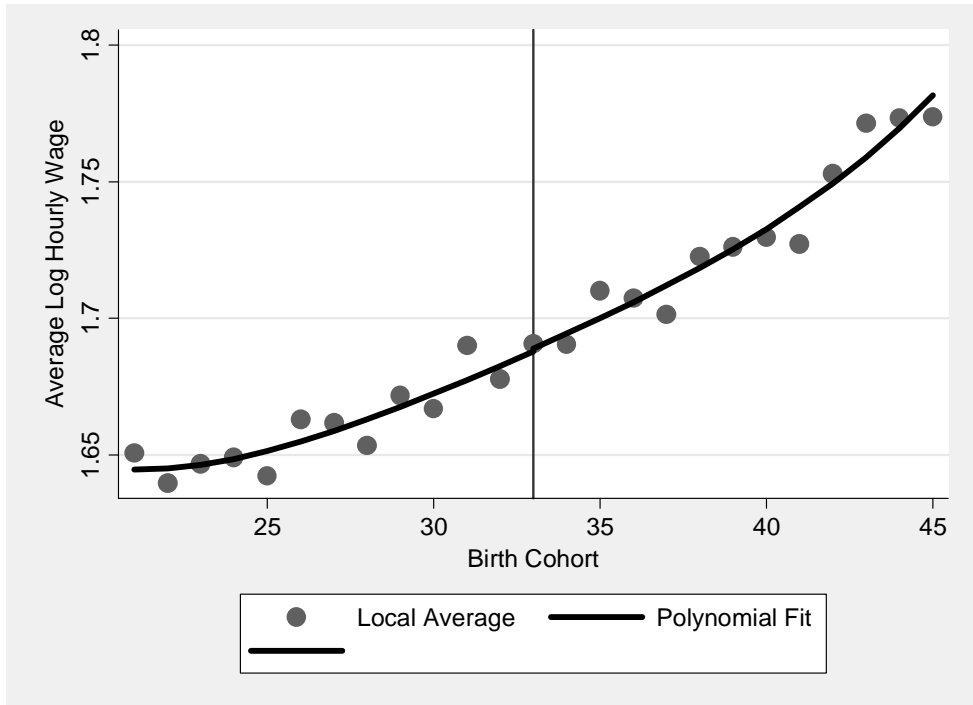
Vertical Line indicates change in school leaving age from 14 to 15

Figure 4: Average School Leaving Age by Cohort for Men (GHS)



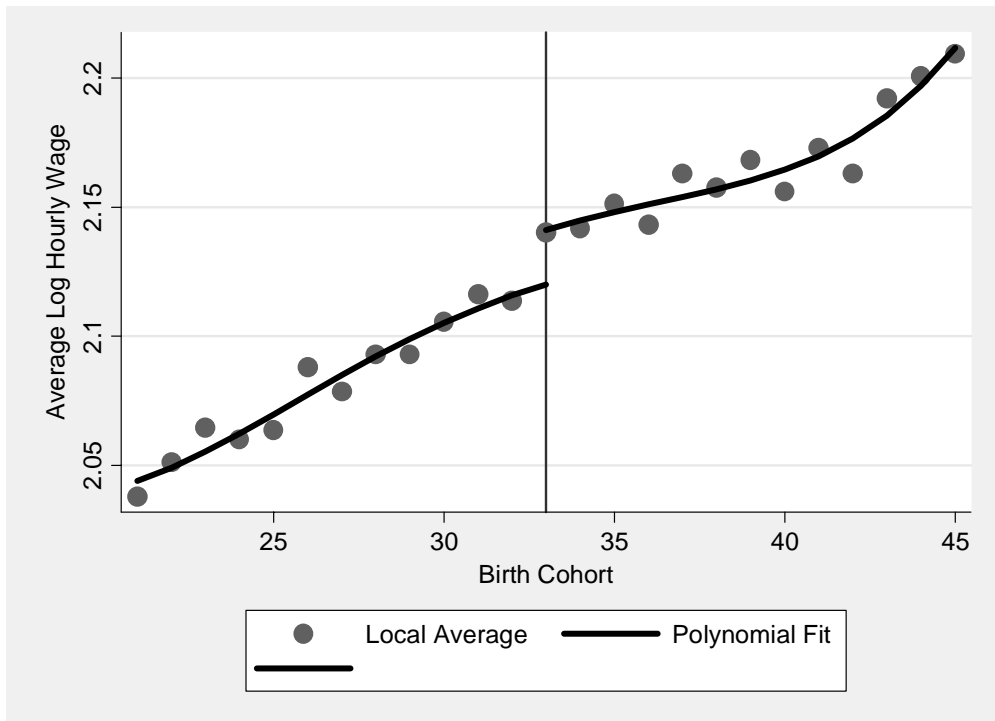
Vertical Line indicates change in school leaving age from 14 to 15

Figure 5: Average Hourly Base Pay by Cohort for Women (NESPD)



Vertical Line indicates change in school leaving age from 14 to 15

Figure 6: Average Hourly Base Pay by Cohort for Men (NESPD)



Vertical Line indicates change in school leaving age from 14 to 15.