

# Do Schooling Cutoff Dates Influence Crime?

## Evidence from Florida and Illinois

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### Abstract

This paper investigates whether school entry cutoff dates causally influence long-run prison admissions. Using administrative prison data from Florida and Illinois, two states that gradually moved up their kindergarten eligibility cutoff dates by one month per year during the 1980s, I exploit quasi-random assignment of school start age based on date of birth to estimate effects on incarceration. Children born just after the cutoff were required to delay kindergarten entry by a year, which reduced their required schooling and altered peer interactions during formative years. I combine a fuzzy regression discontinuity design with a Poisson model to estimate the impact of this delayed entry on prison admissions later in life. Leveraging temporal variation in school entry cutoffs, I link school start age to incarceration outcomes observed decades later and offer novel evidence on how school start age can shape long-run criminal outcomes using administrative data.

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# I Introduction

There is a large literature connecting human capital accumulation to criminal behavior, both in theory (e.g. [Becker 1968](#), [Ehrlich 1973](#), and [Lochner 2004](#)) and empirical work (e.g. [Angrist and Krueger 1991](#), [Lochner and Moretti 2004](#), and [Anderson 2014](#)). Education raises the opportunity cost of crime, making criminal activity less appealing and shifting the margin for those choosing between legal and illegal behavior. In this paper, I exploit an understudied source of variation in crime economics: the birthday cutoff to start kindergarten. These cutoffs determine whether a child starts kindergarten at age four or five, depending on their date of birth.

I use variation in school starting age that comes from policy reforms in Florida and Illinois during the 1980s. Both states gradually moved their kindergarten eligibility cutoffs earlier in the calendar year. This change caused children born just after the new cutoff date to delay kindergarten by a year. I examine whether this delay affects adult incarceration.

Two channels may explain how school entry cutoffs affect crime. The first is what I call the peer and maturity channel. A child born just after the cutoff becomes one of the oldest in their grade, while a child born just before is one of the youngest. This relative age can shape a child's academic performance and social development. Both [Black, Devereux, and Salvanes \(2011\)](#) and [Fredriksson and Ockert \(2013\)](#) find being older at school entry improves educational performance, although long-run consequences remain ambiguous. [Dobkin and Ferreira \(2010\)](#) find that starting school earlier lowers test scores initially, increases schooling, and has mixed effects on adult wages and employment.

The second channel relates to human capital accumulation. Historically, all compulsory schooling laws are based solely on age rather than grade level or achievement. In most states, students can leave school at sixteen with parental permission or at eighteen without it. Several papers exploit this structure. [Angrist and Krueger \(1991\)](#) use quarter of birth as an instrument for education, showing that additional schooling leads to higher earnings. [Lochner and Moretti \(2004\)](#) use state-level changes in compulsory schooling laws and find that more education reduces arrests and incarceration. [Hjalmarsson, Holmlund, and Lindquist \(2015\)](#) reach similar conclusions using Swedish data. Variation in cutoffs is particularly important in my context, as demographic groups with high crime

rates are also those most likely to exit before completing high school ([Lochner and Moretti 2004](#)).

Although less relevant when studying the school entry cutoff, the relationship between schooling and crime is strengthened by incapacitation effects. [Anderson \(2014\)](#) finds that when the legal dropout age is lowered, juvenile crime increases. [Bell, Costa, and Machin \(2022\)](#) finds evidence of both a short-term and long-term incapacitation effect caused by compulsory schooling, with the long-term effect stemming from individuals' reduced likelihood of exposure to criminal environments during adolescence.

My paper makes a novel contribution by linking school entry age and compulsory schooling to long-run incarceration with administrative data. [Depew and Eren \(2016\)](#) find that delayed school entry age reduces juvenile crime among black females and reduces the severity of their crimes. They find no evidence of an effect on males. Other papers, such as [Cook and Kang \(2016\)](#) in North Carolina and [Landersø, Nielsen, and Simonsen \(2015\)](#) in Sweden, find being born just after the cutoff to cause more crime for individuals before they are nineteen. Closest to my study, [McAdams \(2016\)](#) uses U.S. Census data and finds that earlier school entry cutoffs reduce adult incarceration overall, but increases incarceration for those whose start was delayed do to changes in the cutoff. None of the papers in the literature link school starting age cutoffs and delayed school entry to long-run criminal activity.

A similar identification strategy appears in [Arenberg, Neller, and Stripling \(2024\)](#), who use Medicaid eligibility cutoffs based on date of birth to estimate the long-run effects of childhood healthcare access on incarceration. Using Florida prison data, they find that Medicaid access reduces incarceration rates for Black youth, particularly for financially motivated offenses.

This paper contributes to the literature by using Florida and Illinois administrative prison data to exploit the gradual change of school entry cutoffs in the 1980s. Because the reforms were enacted after the affected cohorts were conceived, this, in combination with compulsory schooling laws, generates plausibly exogenous variation in school start age and required schooling. I estimate the causal effect of being born after the cutoff on prison admissions using a fuzzy regression discontinuity design and a Poisson model.

## II Institution

School entry cutoffs refer to the date used to determine whether a child starts school that year or must wait until the following year<sup>1</sup>. In both Florida and Illinois, children must turn five on or before the cutoff date of the school year to be eligible to begin kindergarten that same school year. Prior to any variation I exploit, Florida had a kindergarten birthday cutoff of January 1 and Illinois had a cutoff of December 1. Thus, children in Florida must turn five on or before January 1 of the school year in which they begin kindergarten. This creates a discontinuity where the running variable is date of birth. Children born on January 1 and January 2 are only one day apart, but the older child begins school a full year earlier. Additionally, because compulsory schooling laws are age-based, they become eligible to leave school only one day apart. Thus the cutoff alone causes those born after January 1 to receive a year less of required schooling. Similar examples hold for Illinois where the cutoff was December 1 initially.

Prior to the 1980 – 1981 school year, neither state had changed the cutoff date since their inception in 1965 and 1895 for Florida and Illinois, respectively ([Florida Senate Committee on Education Innovation 1999](#) and [Education Week 1987](#)). In 1978, Florida House Bill 1036 was proposed in Florida to move the kindergarten birthday cutoff by one month per year for four years. This policy ultimately moved the cutoff from January 1 to September 1 over four years. Florida House Bill 1036 was enacted in 1979 and began to take effect in the 1980 – 1981 school year where the school cutoff date became December 1st rather than January 1st. This initially delayed the school start of children born between December 2, 1975 and January 1, 1976 (inclusive) ([Florida Legislature 1979](#)).

Illinois had a similar change in kindergarten cutoff proposed in 1984, with the Illinois General Assembly enacting it in 1985 ([Education Week 1987](#)). This law also moved the cutoff by one month per year, but for only three years (Illinois’s cutoff was already a month earlier than Florida’s). This first affected the cohort beginning kindergarten in 1986–1987, whose cutoff date moved from December 1st to November 1st. This delayed the school start of children born between November 2, 1981 and December 1, 1981 (inclusive). I include a timeline of the change in cutoff dates for Florida and Illinois relative to the initial year in figure 1 as well as a more detailed version in table 1 of

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<sup>1</sup>I use kindergarten and school cutoffs synonymously.

the [appendix](#). These cutoffs remained constant in Florida and Illinois for decades following these changes ([Education Commission of the States 2014](#)).

In addition to the initial birthdays delayed which I mention above, each subsequent year, an additional month of birthdays was delayed until each state had a cutoff of September 1<sup>2</sup>. This creates additional discontinuities, which I pool since subsequent cutoffs should not be influenced by earlier changes. I include observations within a month bandwidth for each change in the cutoff.

Importantly, neither Florida nor Illinois experienced changes in the minimum age at which students could legally withdraw from school<sup>3</sup> during the sample period ([Florida Legislature 1970](#); [Illinois General Assembly 1970](#); [Illinois State Board of Education 1983](#); [Angrist and Krueger 1991](#); [Knapp et al. 2025](#)). Students in Florida could not drop out until the age of sixteen with a parent or guardian’s permission. While those in Illinois were required to attend school until seventeen. Only then could they leave with a parent or guardian’s permission. Upon turning eighteen in either state, an individual is then considered an adult and can leave school without any permission from a parent or guardian. Thus all variation in the amount of required schooling for these individuals is solely determined by the time that they can enroll in kindergarten<sup>4</sup>.

### III Data and Methodology

#### III.A Florida and Illinois Data

I use public data from the Florida Offender-Based Information System (FOBIS) and Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC). FOBIS includes all Florida prisoners admitted since 1981, while IDOC includes those in Illinois since 2005<sup>5</sup>. Most importantly, both datasets include the date of

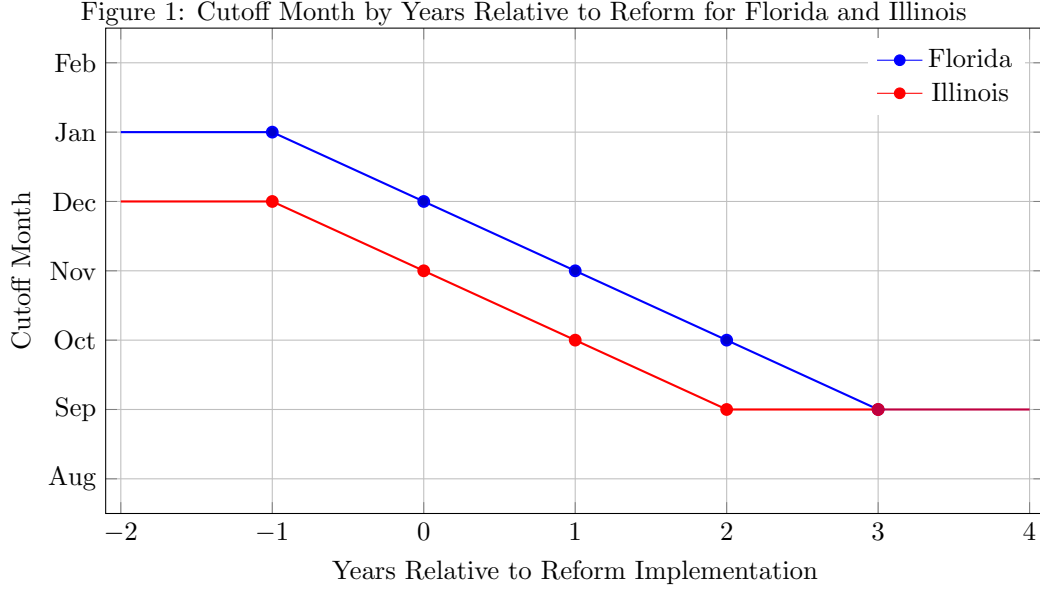
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<sup>2</sup>Those delayed include individuals born between the following dates (inclusive) in Florida: November 2, 1976 – January 31, 1977, October 2, 1977 – January 1, 1978, and September 2, 1978 – January 1 1979. The following were also delayed in Illinois: October 2 – December 1, 1982, and September 2 – December 1, 1983.

<sup>3</sup>Defined as the upper bound of compulsory schooling.

<sup>4</sup>This is under the assumption that parents always enrolled students in school when they were first eligible for kindergarten as compulsory schooling laws at the time allowed children to legally be out of school until six in Florida and seven in Illinois ([Angrist and Krueger 1991](#); [Florida Legislature 1970](#); [Illinois General Assembly 1970](#)). Failure to meet this assumption results in attenuation bias.

<sup>5</sup>The initially affected cohort in Indiana were twenty-four in 2005. This will attenuate the estimated effect in Illinois since I don’t capture crimes during early adult years for these individuals. This is shown in table 2 of the [appendix](#).



*Note:* The school cutoff always took place on the first of the month. Florida implemented the reform in the 1980 – 1981 school year while Illinois did so in the 1986 – 1987 school year. These school years serve as year 0 in the figure. Based on information from [Florida Senate Committee on Education Innovation \(1999\)](#), [Florida Legislature \(1979\)](#), and [Education Week \(1987\)](#). A more detailed version of this is included in table 1 within the [appendix](#).

birth for all prisoners admitted so that I can know when they were eligible to start school<sup>6</sup>. Other demographic information is available, including race, gender, and offense type.

Because the cutoff moved up one month per year for four years in Florida and three in Illinois, I pool observations across both states and each cutoff change. Unobservable differences in Florida and Illinois may create heterogeneous effects, so I include state fixed effects to account for time-invariant differences between states<sup>7</sup>. Thus the estimate is the average effect of the change across Florida and Illinois for each change.

Each law was enacted in the year prior to taking effect. Since the full roll-out in each state took fewer than five years, I can exploit the discontinuity at each new cutoff since all children were born before the policy was proposed. This timing ensures that parents could not have timed births in response to the policy. Assuming that birthdays are as good as random around the new cutoffs gives appropriate exogeneity lending to a regression discontinuity design (RDD)<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup>I make the implicit assumption that all prisoners observed grew up in the same state they went to prison in. This is likely not the case, and will attenuate my results since I do not have data on where prisoners started school or were born.

<sup>7</sup>I will report results on only Florida and only Illinois in addition to both of them in the future.

<sup>8</sup>This assumption is common in the literature (e.g. [Angrist and Krueger 1991](#) and [Cook and Kang 2016](#)).

### III.B Regression Discontinuity Design

I begin with a bandwidth of one month around the cutoff. This includes individuals born up to thirty-one days before or after the cutoff. I define my running variable,  $Distance_{ds}$ , as in equation 1.

$$Distance_{ds} = DateOfBirth_d - Cutoff_{ds} \quad (1)$$

Here,  $Distance_{ds}$  is the number of days between the date of birth,  $DateOfBirth_d$ , and its corresponding cutoff date,  $Cutoff_{ds}$ , in state  $s$ .  $Distance_{ds}$  can take both positive and negative values.  $Cutoff_{ds}$  is the kindergarten entry cutoff in effect in state  $s$  for the cohort born on date  $d$ <sup>9</sup>. I show the RDD in equation 2.

$$\begin{aligned} Admissions_d = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 Delayed_d + \beta_2 Distance_{ds} \\ & + \beta_3 Delayed_d \times Distance_{ds} + State_s + \epsilon_d \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

Here,  $Admissions_d$  is the number of prisoners admitted at some point with the birthday  $d$ .  $Delayed_d$  is an indicator equal to one if  $Distance_{ds}$  is greater than 0, meaning that individuals born on day  $d$  in state  $s$  were delayed kindergarten entry a year due to the change in birthday cutoff for their cohort.  $State_s$  is a state fixed effect which is required due to the policy implementation occurring in two states.

$\beta_1$  is the local average treatment effect (LATE) of a delayed kindergarten start date on the number of prisoners born on a given day. This LATE is identified under two assumptions: (1) that births are as-good-as-random around the cutoff, and (2) a monotonicity assumption. The monotonicity assumption in this case being that no parents choose to delay school entry if their child is born before the cutoff, and would choose to petition for their child to start early if they were born after the cutoff. If  $\beta_1$  is statistically significant, then there is a discontinuous change in the number of prisoners born just after the cutoff compared to before. A positive  $\beta_1$  provides evidence of increased rates of incarceration due to being born after the cutoff. Thus the combination of being the oldest in your cohort and being required to have up to one year less of education increased the likelihood

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<sup>9</sup>This is either December 1, November 1, October 1, or September 1 in Florida and November 1, October 1, or September 1 in Illinois.

of incarceration.

### III.C Poisson Model

Additionally, I measure the difference in incarcerations of individuals with birthdays relative to the cutoff using a Poisson pseudo-maximum likelihood (PPML) model where the unit of observation is date of birth (Santos Silva and Tenreiro 2006). This accounts for a plausibly nonlinear relationship between the birthday relative to the cutoff and incarceration as Fredriksson and Ockert (2013) found nonlinear effects of start cutoffs on educational attainment. The specification in equation 3 allows me to estimate the percentage change in incarceration associated with being born just after the school entry cutoff.

$$\begin{aligned} \log(E[Admissions_d]) = & \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Delayed_d + \alpha_2 Distance_{ds} \\ & + \alpha_3 Delayed_d \times Distance_{ds} + State_s \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

Here,  $Admissions_d$  is the number of individuals ever admitted to prison who were born on day  $d$  just as in the RDD.  $Delayed_d$ ,  $Distance_{ds}$ , and  $State_s$  are the same as in the RD model in equation 2, but at the date level. I calculate the log of the expectation using the specification in equation 4 where  $X_d$  includes all regressors in the EDD (equation 3):  $Delayed_d$ ,  $Distance_{ds}$ ,  $State_s$ .

$$\log(E[Admissions_d]) = X_d \delta \quad (4)$$

The coefficient of interest is  $\alpha_1$  which captures the semi-elasticity of prison admission with respect to the cutoff. Specifically,  $(\exp(\alpha_1) - 1)\%$  more prison admissions occurred for individuals born just after the cutoff relative to those born just before. This model accounts for potential nonlinearity in the relationship between birth day and incarceration risk and allows for a flexible functional form.



## IV Appendix

Table 1: Kindergarten Cutoff Birthday by State and Year

State	Pre-1980	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984-1985	1986	1987	1988	Post-1988
Florida	Jan 1	Dec 1	Nov 1	Oct 1	Sept 1	Sept 1	Sept 1	Sept 1	Sept 1	Sept 1
Illinois	Dec 1	Dec 1	Dec 1	Dec 1	Dec 1	Dec 1	Nov 1	Oct 1	Sept 1	Sept 1

*Note:* Based on information from [Florida Senate Committee on Education Innovation \(1999\)](#), [Florida Legislature \(1979\)](#), and [Education Week \(1987\)](#).

Table 2: Prison Admissions Data Available in Illinois by Age

Birthday Cohort	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Dec 2, 1979 – Dec 1, 1980						X	X
Dec 2, 1980 – Nov 1, 1981					X	X	X
Nov 2, 1981 – Oct 1, 1982				X	X	X	X
Oct 2, 1982 – Sept 1, 1983			X	X	X	X	X
Sept 2, 1983 – Sept 1, 1984		X	X	X	X	X	X
Sept 2, 1984 – Sept 1, 1985	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sept 2, 1985 – Sept 1, 1986	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

*Note:* Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) prison admissions data is only available from 2005 onward. As a result, the number of observed years of criminal history increases for later cohorts. I observe admissions data starting at age 24 for the first cohort affected by the policy, and gain an additional year for each subsequent cohort.

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