

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

European Economic Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/euroecorev

Gender crime convergence over twenty years: Evidence from Australia

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 January 2017

Accepted 6 January 2018

Available online xxx

JEL classifications:

I2

K42

Keywords:

Crime

Gender

Convergence

ABSTRACT

Historically men have been responsible for the majority of criminal activity and dominate prison populations around the globe. The twentieth century witnessed significant male–female convergence in a myriad of positive dimensions including human capital acquisition, labour force participation and wages. This has prompted the question, to what extent are women ‘looking more like men’? In this paper we examine whether similar forces are at play in the context of criminality. We study the pattern of gender convergence in crime using rich administrative data on the population of young people in Queensland, Australia. The evidence points to a significant narrowing of the gender gap in criminal activity over the course of the last twenty years. Crime convergence occurs for broad aggregates of both property and violent crime, as well as for almost all sub-component categories. Convergence occurs largely because crime has fallen significantly for men, combined with no downward trend for women. This is confirmed by aggregate analysis of rates of offending in police force districts matched to Census data by gender between 2001 and 2016.

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1. Introduction

In her American Economic Association Presidential address, [Goldin \(2014\)](#) highlights the convergence in female/male economic and social outcomes as one of the most significant advances of the twentieth century. She points to gender convergence in human capital skills; women overtaking men in terms of the proportion with a college degree, and declining gender differences in labour force participation and accumulated labour market experience. Observed female progress in terms of human capital acquisition in turn led to greater gender equality in wages. As Goldin suggests, women are looking ‘more like men’. However, one feature untouched by her address is the possibility of gender convergence in one particularly important economic and social outcome, criminality. It is an interesting, yet almost entirely neglected research question to ask “Do women look more like men in terms of crime participation?”

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Table 1
Imprisonment rates and female shares in three selected countries.

	Australia	Sweden	United States
Imprisonment rate (per 100,000 population)	162	53	693
Female share (%)	8.0	5.8	9.7

Notes: From World Prison Brief, <http://www.prisonstudies.org/>. The years the numbers correspond to for each country are: Australia – 2016; Sweden – 2016; United States – 2014.

Unlike other areas of economic research, where the importance of gender is prominent and has been studied in great detail¹, a lot of the empirical literature in the economics of crime focuses solely on males.² This, of course, is because traditionally crime is very much in the male domain. Indeed, it is clear if one looks at patterns of criminality that the male share is, and always has been, high. Table 1 shows information on the rate of imprisonment and female prisoner shares in Australia, Sweden and the US. The latter is less than 10% and appears independent of a country's aggregate level of incarceration.³ There are two underlying reasons; females commit less crime than males, and the types of crime females commit tend to be of the less serious variety.⁴ The data analysed in this paper suggests that overall the female share of violent or property crimes is just over 20%, but with much lower shares for murder and other serious assaults.

Patterns of female/male criminality have clearly changed over time.⁵ In the United States, for example, over the course of the 20th century less than 20 females per 100,000 population were incarcerated. From 2000 onwards, the rate rose, reaching in excess of 120 per 100,000 population. A similar pattern of an increasing share of women is also seen in the lower imprisonment countries shown in Table 1, i.e. Australia and Sweden.⁶

So, is gender crime convergence associated with female advances in economic and social status? Is it another element of Goldin's (2014) 'looking like men' hypothesis, or are there significant differences in context? While largely untouched by economists, these issues have frequently featured in the criminology and sociology of crime literatures (see Schwartz and Steffensmeier, 2015). Arguments abound as to whether or not the same proximate causes are relevant for male and female crime, and whether a gender specific or gender-neutral approach holds the most promise (see, for example, Steffensmeier and Allan, 1996; or Daigle et al., 2007). Approaches vary though they frequently share a focus on gender differences in socialisation and roles. Exposure to violence, peer group delinquency and victimisation are also seen to play a critical role (see Nofziger and Kurtz, 2005 and Moffitt and Caspi, 2001). Hoskin (2017), on the other hand, studies biological differences between males and females, and in particular the role of testosterone in generating gender differences in risk taking and levels of empathy.

In light of Goldin's (2014) analysis of gender convergence, it is interesting that the gender equality hypothesis gained traction quite some time ago in the sociology of crime literature, and has been hotly debated since. In this paradigm, a by-product of female progress in economic and social status is a higher female share of crime. One potential mechanism of power-control underlying this link is associated with the traditional family and dominant male head of household (Hagan, 1989; Grasmick et al., 1996). In this environment, girls experience greater social control, with a reduced role for delinquent peers and extra-family social bonds. The idea is that greater freedom provides increased opportunity to commit crime and lower social control. Thus, greater equality may lead to more female crime.

An interesting counterpoint emerges from the conventional economic approach to modelling crime. Goldin (2014) paints a picture of substantial female progress, with females looking 'more like men', achieving greater equality and yet the gender equality hypothesis suggests that this in turn leads to increased crime, just like men. This fits some of the stylised facts, but maybe not the orthodox economic intuition. Indeed, the standard Becker (1968) model argues that economic incentives and opportunities are key to crime participation.⁷ One would expect that as females experience improved labour market opportunities, acquire superior human capital skills and gain more equitable labour market wages, the attractions of a life of crime would decline.

¹ Goldin (2014) outlines a series of marked changes in the lives and labour market experiences of women. Dramatic rises in labour force participation, massive increases in education and labour market experience- all leading to significant male-female wage convergence. Goldin points out that the overall male-female wage gap in the US declined due to significant convergence in levels of human capital. She hypothesises that one of the key explanations underlying the remaining residual wage gap is non-linear pay schemes rewarding long hours and work continuity. See the *Handbook of Labor Economics* Chapter by Altonji and Blank (1999) for more details on the prolific research area covering gender and the labour market.

² There are a lot more research papers by criminologists and sociologists on gender and crime, a core research area for a long time. We refer to some of this work in more detail below.

³ The US is characterised by high levels of imprisonment, Sweden with a low incarceration rate and Australia is in the middle. Data for many more countries show the same pattern – see data on the World Prison Brief website, <http://www.prisonstudies.org/>.

⁴ Examples such as minor property crimes (e.g. shoplifting) or drug use record female/male gaps that are much smaller than for gender gaps in major crimes like robbery and murder. Of course, prostitution is the one crime dominated by females.

⁵ See Schwartz et al. (2009) and Lauritsen et al. (2009) for a robust discussion of whether or not female-male violent crime rates have converged within the US.

⁶ The World Prison Brief reports female shares of prisoners for these countries as: Australia – 2000, 6.4% and 2016, 8.0%; Sweden – 2000, 5.1% and 2016, 5.8%. The female share also rises in the US between 2000 and 2014, going from 8.2–9.7%.

⁷ See Draca and Machin (2014) for an up to date review of crime and economic incentives.

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