

The gender gap in crime is decreasing, but who's growing equal to whom?¹

Abstract

The declining gender gap in crime, observed in many Western countries, including Sweden, is often interpreted as showing an alarming shift in the offending of young women. Explanations to the observed pattern are often based on an assumption that women are increasingly coming to mimic the criminal behaviour of men, while we in this essay argue that to the extent behavioural change is at play, it is rather the other way around: men mimic women's behaviour.

Keywords: Gender gap, Crime trends, Equality

The sex ratio in crime varies widely from one nation to another /.../ If countries existed in which females were politically and socially dominant, the female rate, according to this trend, should exceed the male rate. (Sutherland 1947:100)

IT IS NOW more than forty years since Adler et al. noted, in their widely cited book "Sisters in Crime" (1975) that the gender gap in crime had become smaller, which they felt might be explained by reference to women's emancipation. The fundamental thesis is that men's behaviour constitutes the norm, which women will sooner or later come to emulate even in relation to crime. One natural, but rarely posed, question is why increased gender equality should lead to a decline in the gender gap via an increase in female involvement in crime and not instead via a decrease in male offending.

Over recent years, the debate on the declining gender gap has once again become topical. The central question is what is producing the declining gender gap in registered crime. Is it, for example, due to the registered offending of women having increased, while that of men may have decreased, as a result of *behavioural changes* linked to the liberation of women and men from traditional gender roles? An alternative explanation instead refers to a reduced tolerance in western societies towards crime in general and violence in particular. Against this backdrop, the declining gender gap may be under-

1 This essay builds on Estrada, Bäckman, Nilsson (2016): "The Darker Side of Equality? The Declining Gender Gap in Crime: Historical Trends and an Enhanced Analysis of Staggered Birth Cohorts." *British Journal of Criminology*, vol 56 (6): 1272–1290.

stood as being the result of a net-widening process with regard to which behaviours societies are choosing to *react* to and to prosecute through the justice system. Given that women account for a larger proportion of minor offences than of serious crimes, this type of net-widening process will affect the registered crime levels of women more than those of men (Steffensmeier et al. 2005).

The literature on the changing gender gap in crime has primarily focused on the situation in the USA. At the same time, there is nothing to say that the hypotheses on net-widening or a changed propensity for crime among women should not be relevant in other countries. To the extent that the "emancipation hypothesis" is important for understanding the declining gender gap, Sweden constitutes a reasonable case to study. It is easy to find empirical support for the argument that Swedish society lies at the forefront of trends towards increased emancipation among women and increased gender equality. Although Sweden still falls considerably short of complete gender equality, the country is probably counted among those that come closest to the hypothetical situation described by Sutherland in the quotation above.

The current study

Our objective is to elucidate the way the gender gap in crime has changed. In this article we present long historical time series on the gender gap in theft and violent crime. In our original study we have also looked at convictions of different birth cohorts and examined whether the change in the gender gap is general or whether it can be specified to a certain age or to specific categories of theft or violent crime. Most of our findings refute the hypothesis that the declining gender gap in crime is due to an increasing number of women committing offences.

On the basis of long historical time-series describing trends in the gender gap for theft and violent crime in Sweden, we can show that the period subsequent to World War II is unique (Figure 1a–1d). During this period, the gender gap has undergone a continuous and substantial decline. At the same time, the declining gender gap in crime has been produced by different processes during different parts of this post-war period. During the first half of the post-war period, the process is characterised by relative differences, i.e. women's registered crime increases from significantly lower levels than those found among men, whereas recent decades are instead characterised by absolute differences in the trends among men and women respectively. The trends of the first post-war decades thus do not require the same type of gender-specific explanations as those of the most recent 30 years. It would appear more reasonable, for example, to explain the increases in crime noted among both sexes during the first post-war decades as being due to a change in the opportunity structure that affected both men and women than it would to argue that increased equality (Adler et al 1975) was what was pushing both women and men to commit more offences. Thus for the debate regarding the value of the emancipation hypothesis, and that regarding the relative significance of behavioural change and society's reaction to crime respectively, the central issue becomes that of how the trends witnessed since the beginning of the 1980s should best be understood.

Figure 1a–d. Number of convictions for assault (1866–2012) and theft (1841–2012) per 100,000 of population. Men and women, and the gender gap ratio (men/women). Five-year moving averages.

Figure 1a. Number of convictions for assault (1866–2012) per 100,000

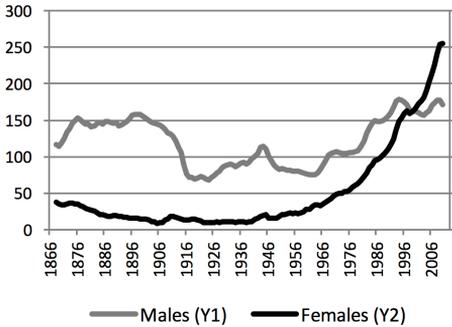


Figure 1b. Gender gap ratio assault (1866–2012)

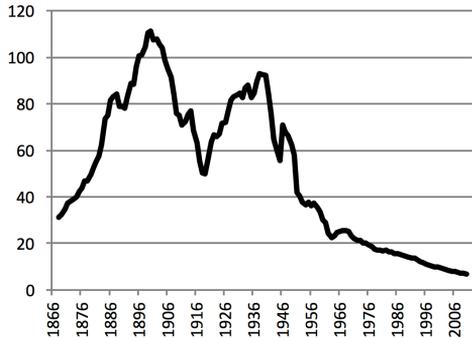


Figure 1c. Number of convictions for theft (1841–2012) per 100,000

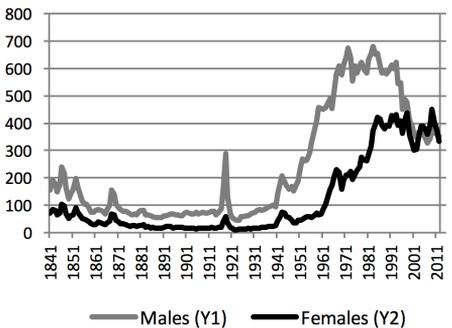
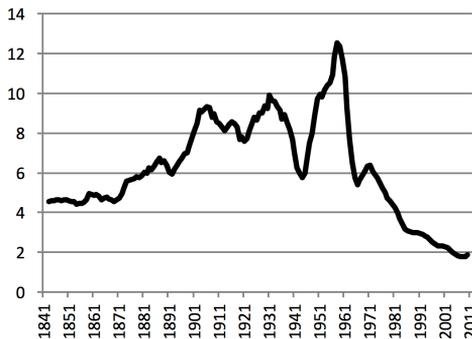


Figure 1d. Gender gap ratio theft (1866–2012)



The most important driving force in recent times is the powerful decline in the number of men convicted of crime. An additional analysis (Estrada et al 2016) of three cohorts born in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s allows us to add that the gender gap has only declined substantially during one particular period of the life course, specifically the later teenage years (age 15–20). When we look more closely at what types of crime the youths from the three cohorts are convicted for, the data suggest that the declining gender gap is due to an increased inflow of minor types of theft and violent crime. These findings are in line with what might be expected as a result of crime policy trends characterised by net-widening (Steffensmeier et al. 2005).

It is likely that these trends have produced a situation in which a larger proportion of young women are starting adult life with a criminal record, and for offences for which they would not previously have been convicted.

Finally, to the extent that the emancipation hypothesis and increased gender equality constitute a relevant explanation, this should be viewed in relation to the general crime trends that have characterised this period, which have taken the form of a visible crime drop rather than increasing crime levels. For those who still wish to focus on behavioural changes, rather than changes in society's reaction to crime, it would today seem more fruitful to focus on the gendered nature of the crime drop rather than on the causes of continually increasing crime among women. We would argue that the paradox here is that arguments focused on gender equality may have potential as a means of explaining why men's crime levels are moving towards those of women, rather than the reverse. The feminist criticism of the way men's behaviour is regarded as the norm tells us that there is nothing innate in men's high levels of crime that women will sooner or later emulate. The low levels of crime found among women are of course at least as "normal" and are perhaps becoming ever more so in societies that are communicating an increasingly intolerant view of crime. This means that with increasing gender equality, the values and behaviour patterns that have traditionally been viewed as more feminine, many of which have an inhibitory effect on crime, may be spreading to broader groups of men. Stated briefly, to the extent that increased gender equality may have affected the difference between men's and women's propensity for crime, its effect may primarily be due to having produced changes in the type of masculinity that encourages criminality.

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