



THE CRIMES OF WOMEN

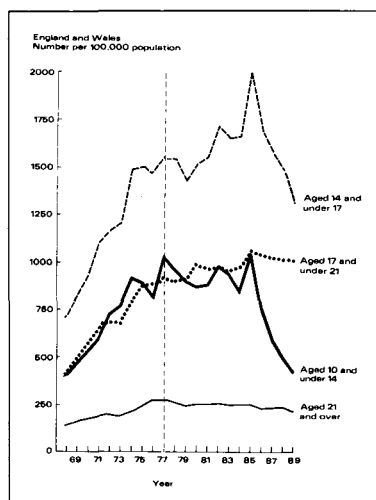
Patterns and Trends in Crime

Barbara Wootton once suggested that 'if men behaved like women, the courts would be idle and the prisons empty'. More recently, however, women criminals have been taken more seriously: women terrorists' activities have been widely shown in the mass media. What is the true picture? Do women commit their fair share of crime? What kinds of crimes are they involved in? Are these patterns changing?

Scrutiny of the figures of officially-recorded crime show that women contribute only a modest part of the overall total. In 1988 women formed 15% of the those found guilty of, or cautioned for, indictable offences. This is not very far from the proportion observed in the 19th century when an early statistical work indicated that women were 'only ten per cent of the trouble'. Indeed this proportion has remained fairly stable over a long period: in 1930 women were 11% of the total, in 1950 14% and in 1970 13%. However, these percentages mask three things: the overall rise in crime figures which has been massive, some fluctuations in the female share of criminality and considerable variations between particular categories of offence.

At certain periods, female crime rates have risen more steeply than male. This was notably the case in the period from the mid 1960s to the mid 1980s, during

Females found guilty of, or cautioned for, indictable offences per 100,000 population by age group.



Source: Criminal Statistics England & Wales 1989

which rates of female offending more than doubled while male rates only doubled. But more recently, there has been some decline - 'known' female offenders fell by 7% in 1988. Some commentators have seen a new type of female criminal as responsible for these faster increases - a liberated ruthless villain. Evidence to support this view is lacking. Women still contribute a very small share to overall crime and have not dramatically changed their pattern of offending.

Types of Crime

Within the broad pattern of crime, women make their mark in every area, save where offences are linked to particular sexual characteristics. Their share is highest in property offences, although they rarely achieve parity even in such an apparently 'conventional' female offence as shoplifting. Women's most characteristic crimes are theft and handling, fraud and forgery, and increasingly drug related offences. About 9% of female offenders

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are cautioned or convicted for violent offences: the numbers of offenders have varied between 3,500 and 4,000 each year since 1978. Crime is not a characteristically female activity. Home Office studies suggest, for instance, that, over their lifetimes, about 7% of women will be convicted of a standard list offence and at the peak age of offending about 1% are criminally active.

Such findings are based on official records and these are, of course, increasingly questioned. So much doubt has been raised about the large sex differences noted here that two major types of research have been designed to check them. One is a range of self report studies which seeks to find out 'real' but unrecorded crimes and the other is the series of 'chivalry or bias' studies which have examined whether the police, the courts and other agencies operate in gender stereotyped ways. As is often the case with research, the findings are quite complex. Broadly, it is found that women and girls admit to more offences than are recorded against them: but so do men

and boys. Some studies suggest differential treatment by the courts and other agencies, but this is by no means always favourable to women.

If women commit fewer crimes but in all the offence categories, what characteristics do women offenders have? Data here comes from women's

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own accounts and from research studies which have only begun to flourish in the last 20 years or so. Criminal women are often stereotyped by the media as either especially bad - the evil terrorist, femme fatale or sinful whore - or mad - the hormonally driven shoplifter or child slayer. The reality is more complex and prosaic. Women offenders are often young - 25% were under seventeen in 1988 and their peak age of offending was fifteen, although women continue to offend in middle age. We know most about those few women who go to prison and whose characteristics are recorded. Many were unemployed before their offence, and they often have low levels of educational attainment and few marketable skills. Most have had children and not all will have custody of those children at the time of conviction. A higher proportion are black - about 20% - than their numbers in the general population suggest. The picture that emerges of some women offenders is of poverty, a socially marginal status and, for young offenders, experience of care. There are many complexities to add to this picture of the female offender, but it is certainly not in general a glamorous one.

Women criminals are often described as 'too few to count'. In fact their relative scarcity and novelty, in a criminal justice system largely run and staffed by men with mainly male 'clients', pose particular problems of their own as well as the common and well-known ones. Being an exception is not always an advantage.

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