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Abstract

The focus of this article is on the changing patterns of offending among young people (aged 16-20 years) over time. Using six 'birth cohorts' aged 16-20 in the late 1960s, early 1970s, late 1970s, early 1980s, late 1980s, early 1990s and late 1990s, the study shows that crime participation – in terms of the proportions ever convicted – declined for both males and females. There has also been an overall shift from more 'specialist' criminal behaviour to more 'versatile' behaviour. While the gap between male and female offending is narrowing, the differences remain large. Although fewer young people are coming before the courts, the changing case mix has probably influenced the perception that offending is getting worse. As those committing 'lesser' offences are being dealt with by other means, there are higher *proportions* of young people coming before the courts who exhibit greater versatility and more violence.

Keywords. Offending typologies; crime specialisation; juvenile crime; conviction data; criminal careers; birth cohorts.

Introduction

There is no doubt that patterns of offending change over time. At the beginning of the twentieth century few would have guessed at the impact that the motor car would have on the criminal statistics. Perhaps the computer will similarly change patterns of offending in the twenty-first century. However, most criminological analysis assumes a rather static view of crime. In short, we are not very good at measuring changes in offending.

This article introduces a new body of research which attempts to compare the offending of one generation with another. The focus is on young offenders aged 16-20 years, for the behaviour of young adults continues to be controversial. Also this is the age group which is the peak time for offending.

'Offending behaviour' can mean different things. However, we normally only recognise offenders when they are apprehended by officials, usually the police. Offenders may be given a warning or a caution and, thus, not appear in court. In contrast, a court conviction is a more severe sanction which can have serious consequences or repercussions. Much of the interest in developing court diversionary schemes in the 1980s onwards was to try to avoid the stigma of a criminal conviction. Our work has focused on changes in court convictions over time.

Methods

The database used is the Offenders Index, a court-based database of all 'standard list' criminal convictions[1] in England and Wales from 1963 to the present day. A detailed description is provided elsewhere (Francis, Soothill and Fligelstone, 2004).

Here we are concerned with the Offenders Index ***cohort*** data. This is a subset of the Index consisting of six 'birth cohorts' – a sample of all offenders born in four specified weeks in 1953, 1958, 1963, 1968, 1973 and 1978, with conviction histories recorded until the end of 1999[2]. In total, there are over 47,000 male offenders and 10,000 female offenders in the six cohorts; our young persons' sample consists of the 26,797 males and 4,659 females who were convicted aged 16 to 20[3]. The Office for National Statistics provided population figures so we could consider participation rates.

Changing participation in crime over time

What is not widely recognised is that there are much lower proportions of young persons who have had a criminal conviction in recent years compared with earlier times. Table 1 is presented in terms of population rates so that one can readily assess actual changes over time.

(Table 1 around here)

As Table 1 shows, it is estimated that for *males* 14.4% of those aged 16-20 in the period 1969-1973 were convicted of a standard list offence while in this age-band. The figures for those aged 16-20 in the late 1970s, early 1980s, late 1980s, early 1990s, and late 1990s are 16.7%, 19.0%, 17.3%, 14.0%, and 12.9% respectively. In short, therefore, the 1963 cohort (aged 16-20 between 1979 and 1983) had the highest participation rate in crime measured by convictions. In contrast, the 1978 cohort (aged 16-20 between 1994 and 1998, which is the latest cohort, had the lowest participation rate of 12.9% . Whatever else, we can say that the proportions of males reaching the courts and being convicted fell over the 30 years under study.

The pattern of the results for *females*, also shown in Table 1, is almost identical although the participation rates overall are much lower. Hence, it is estimated that for females 2.4% of those aged 16-20 in the period 1969-1973 were convicted of a standard list offence while in this age-band. The figures for those aged 16-20 in the late 1970s, early 1980s, late 1980s, early 1990s, and late 1990s are 3.3%, 3.8%, 2.9%, 2.3%, and 2.4% respectively. In brief, therefore, again the 1963 cohort (aged 16-20 between 1979 and 1983) had the highest participation rate in crime measured by convictions. However, it is the 1973 cohort (closely matched by the 1978 cohort) which had the lowest participation rate of 2.3%. As with the males, the female court conviction participation rates fell during the 30-year period.

Patterns of offending

Farrington (1999) summarises that "offending is predominantly versatile rather than specialised, particularly at younger ages". However, it is useful to consider in more depth *typologies of offences* which reflect more accurately the vast array of offending behaviour.

Using latent class analysis[4] to identify classes or patterns of official criminal activity, we recorded for each offender which of 38 categories of offences had he or she been convicted of when aged 16-20. Using the data from all six cohorts provides a consistent definition of the latent classes across time against which the individual cohorts can be compared.

For the males, a 16-cluster solution proved to be the most appropriate. In contrast, for females, five clusters were identified as optimal. The larger number of clusters for males

reflects both the greater size of the male sample (more clusters can be detected as statistically separate entities) and a greater diversity of offending behaviour among males.

Males

The 16 clusters can be grouped into four types – specialist, dual offence, versatile and residual. The percentage of the whole (estimated) population of 16-20 year old males in England and Wales that falls into each cluster 'family' or types for each relevant time period is shown as Figure 1.

(Figure 1 around here)

1. Specialist clusters (9 clusters)

These nine separate clusters can be characterised as those focusing predominantly on a single offence and with a low chance of conviction for other offences. The nice clusters are criminal damage; theft; burglary (other than dwellings); theft from vehicles; shoplifting; receiving and handling; drugs (possession etc. only); possession of offensive weapons; resisting arrest etc.

For the first four cohorts around 10 per cent of the 16-20 population were assigned to 'specialist' clusters, but this is halved to around 5 per cent for the last two cohorts.

2. Dual offence clusters (3 clusters)

These three clusters are considered as *dual offence* as they have two significant offence categories present. These can be described as a general violence group; general burglary group; fraud & forgery with some theft. This category remains fairly steady over the period with around three per cent of males consistently convicted for such behaviour.

3. Versatile (3 clusters)

These three clusters can be considered as versatile by dint of the fact that the offenders exhibit a range of offences with no one offence dominant. They are described as versatile acquisitive; disorganised versatile; very versatile/frequent.

The proportion of young males involved in versatile offending doubles from around two per cent for the 1953 cohort to around four per cent for the last four cohorts.

4. The residual offenders (1 cluster)

This cluster covers some specific offence groups (e.g. theft by an employee) not captured elsewhere. In addition, some of the offence behaviour involved here is of an unusual nature. Around one per cent of males aged 16-20 years are assigned to this cluster and there is no noticeable shift in this proportion over time.

Females

There are again four types of clusters for the females. The percentage of the whole (estimated) population of 16-20 year old females in England and Wales that falls into each cluster 'family' or types for each relevant time period is shown as Figure 2. However, for the females, the two specialist clusters of shoplifting and violence are both displayed.

1. Specialist clusters (2 clusters)

The two specialist clusters are '*Shoplifting'* (which is the largest cluster for the females) and '*Violence'*. Around 1 per cent of the female 16-20 population are consistently assigned to 'specialist' clusters for each of the cohorts. However, as Figure 2 shows, the two clusters show different trends - shoplifting as a specialist cluster is declining, while the violence cluster is increasing.

2. Dual offence (1 cluster)

This cluster can be characterised as '*Theft / some Fraud & Forgery'*. There is an appreciable decline in such behaviour in relation to the later 1973 and 1978 cohorts.

3. Versatile (1 cluster)

This cluster, '*Versatile / frequent'*, is defined by a considerable range of criminal activity. From a very low base the rise in versatile female offending is even more dramatic than for the males – from 0.05 per cent for the 1953 cohort to 0.37% for the last two cohorts.

4. Residual offenders (1 cluster)

The residual category includes offences that are relatively uncommon (among females). So, for example, the majority of females with convictions for immigration offences, theft by employee, public order offences, child cruelty, and import / export / production of drugs when aged 16-20 will be assigned to this cluster rather than one of the other four. Similar to the males, around one per cent of the female 16-20 population are assigned to this cluster. There is no noticeable shift over time.

Conclusions

The results powerfully indicate that there have been some quite remarkable shifts in conviction patterns over time and that these are measurable. The headline story is that 'specialist' clusters are declining for males but not for females, while 'versatile' clusters are definitely increasing for both. But such a stark statement masks variations within the 'specialist' and 'versatile' clusters, which cannot be considered here (see, Soothill et al. 2006, 2007 for further details)..

Thus, we can estimate that the proportion of the young adult male population who are involved in highly versatile offending – which is characterised by at least four separate court convictions in the five year period – has dramatically changed. This proportion has doubled from around one in fifty of the male 16-20 population in the early 1970s to one in twenty-five in the late 1990s. For the female 16-20 age group, we observe an even more spectacular increase in versatile offending from one in 2000 in the early 1970s to one in 300 in the late 1990s – nearly seven times the original proportion. However, while the gap is narrowing, the difference between male and female versatile offending nevertheless remains large.

The reality is that a lower proportion of the 16-20 age group was being convicted by the courts by the end of the 1990s, but the general perception seemed to be that the situation was deteriorating. We have identified that the truth is more complex. While a smaller proportion of the 16-20 population was being brought before the courts, the case mix had markedly changed over the 30 years of our study. Many males and females are being convicted of a far wider repertoire of criminal behaviour in recent years. Further, the nature of the criminal behaviour which the magistracy and judiciary are trying in their courts is changing. So, for instance, the rarity of a drug offence has been replaced by the pervasiveness of drug-related offences. However, by observing the quality of the offending which comes before the courts, it perhaps seems so much worse because those committing 'lesser' offences are being dealt with by other means. Hence, while the quantity of young people coming before the courts (that is, the participation rate) has declined, the problem is that higher *proportions* of those young people who come before the courts in recent years exhibit greater versatility and more violence. These are still the minority of offenders but, nowadays, they seem to make a greater impact.

Acknowledgements

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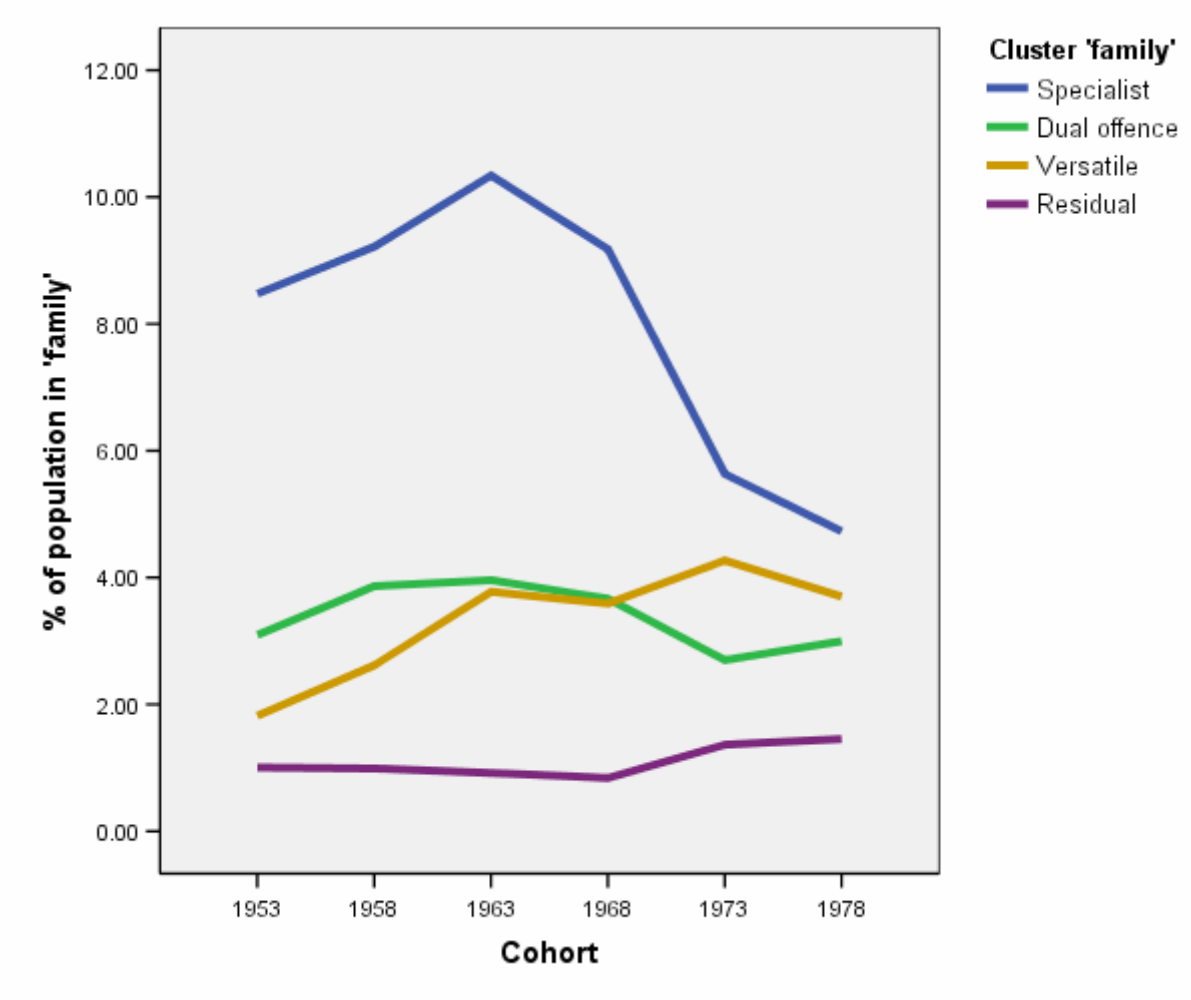
Table 1: Participation rates of the six cohorts aged 16-20 years

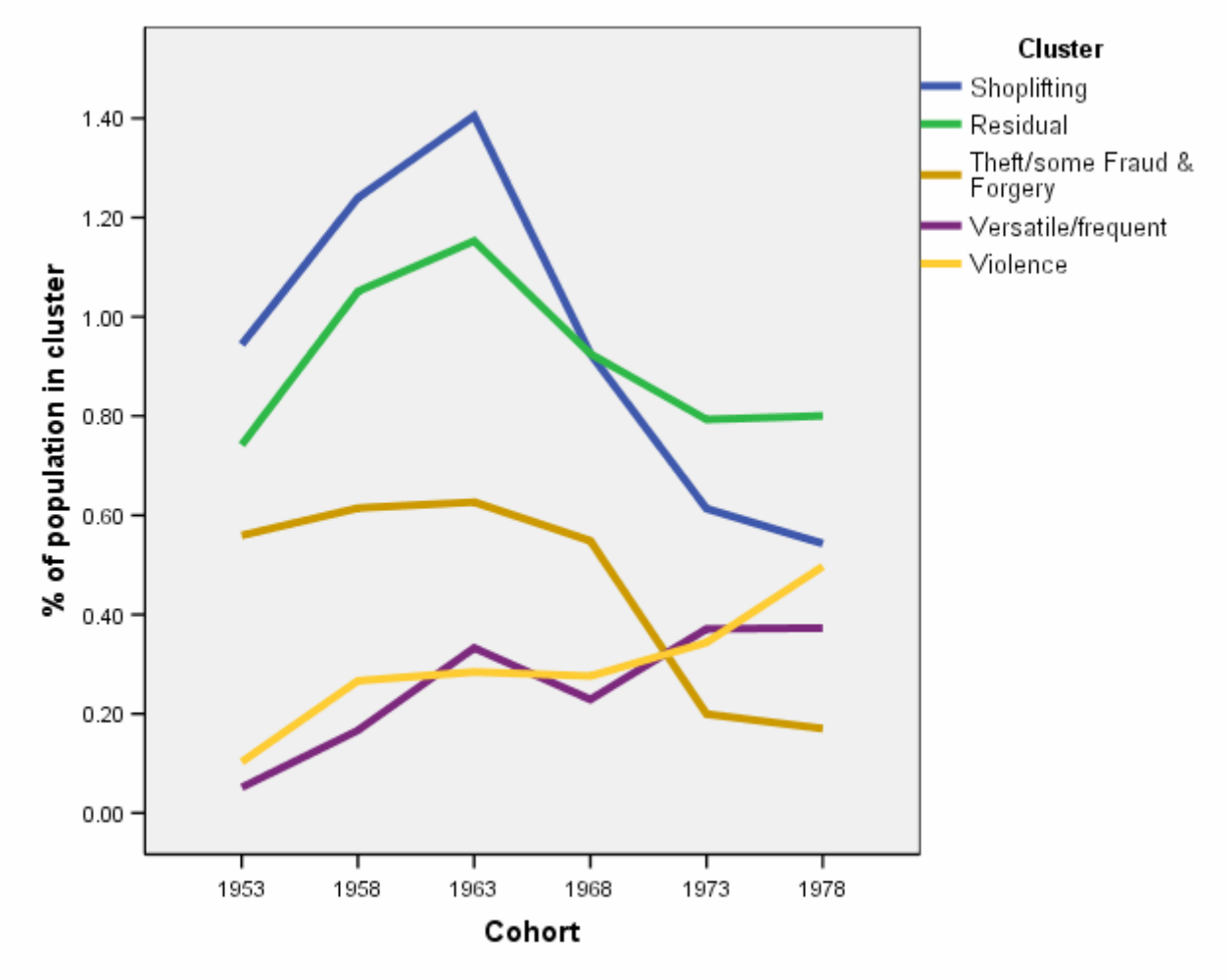
	MALES			FEMALES		
Birth cohort	Estimated male population (16-20)	Estimated number of males with conviction aged 16-20	% of males with conviction Aged 16-20	Estimated female population (16-20)	Estimated number of females with conviction aged 16-20	% of females with conviction Aged 16-20
1953 (16-20 in 1969-1973)	342,800	49,348	14.4	327,700	7,865	2.4
1958 (16-20 in 1974-1978)	366,720	61,191	16.7	351,240	11,726	3.3
1963 (16-20 in 1979-1983)	419,913	79,768	19.0	402,540	15,301	3.8
1968 (16-20 in 1984-1988)	405,907	70,122	17.3	386,278	11,219	2.9
1973 (16-20 in 1989-1993)	353,446	49,374	14.0	332,819	7,722	2.3
1978 (16-20 in 1994-1998)	299,297	38,558	12.9	282,541	6,734	2.4

#
Figure 1: Males



Percentage of the whole (estimated) population of 16-20 year olds in England and Wales in the relevant time period that falls into each cluster

Figure 2: Females



Percentage of the whole (estimated) population of 16-20 year olds in England and Wales in the relevant time period that falls into each cluster

Footnotes

[1] Standard list convictions include all offences triable at crown court and the more serious offences which are triable at magistrates' courts only or in either court system.
[2] A public version of the dataset with a shorter follow-up time is available from the ESRC Data Archive (http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/)
[3] In terms of consistency, we follow Soothill, Ackerley and Francis (2004) who excluded two offences – 'drink driving' and 'driving whilst disqualified' – that were classed as standard list offences only from 1996. Around 3,200 males and 500 females were therefore discarded from the data.
[4] Latent class analysis is a probabilistic cluster analysis technique, which identifies clusters that group together (in this instance) offenders who share similar conviction characteristics when aged 16-20.

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