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Young but not so restless: Trends in the age-specific rate of offending

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Aim: *To describe and discuss trends in age-specific rates of offending for property crime, robbery and serious assault.*

Method: *Descriptive statistics and graphical displays.*

Results: *The number of people apprehended by police for property crime and robbery has fallen sharply since around 2001 and is much lower now than it was 15 years ago. The decline has been most pronounced among adolescent and young adult offenders (aged 15-20 years). The rate at which people in this age group were apprehended for robbery first rose and fell between 1995 and 2004 and then rose and fell (again) between 2005 and 2012. The rate at which 21-24 year olds were apprehended for robbery declined between 1999 and 2012. A similar but less pronounced pattern is seen for 25-29 year olds. The rate at which people were apprehended for serious assault remained fairly stable for all age groups up until around 2003. Thereafter the rate rose rapidly for 15-20 year olds, peaking at around 2008 and then falling from 2009 to 2012. The rate at which older age groups have been apprehended by police for assault remained fairly steady since 1999 but over the last three years has slowly declined.*

Conclusion: *It is impossible to be certain but there is good reason to expect a continuation of the downward trend in rates of property crime and robbery in NSW. The future course of trends in serious assault will likely depend on whether the current fall in alcohol misuse by young people continues.*

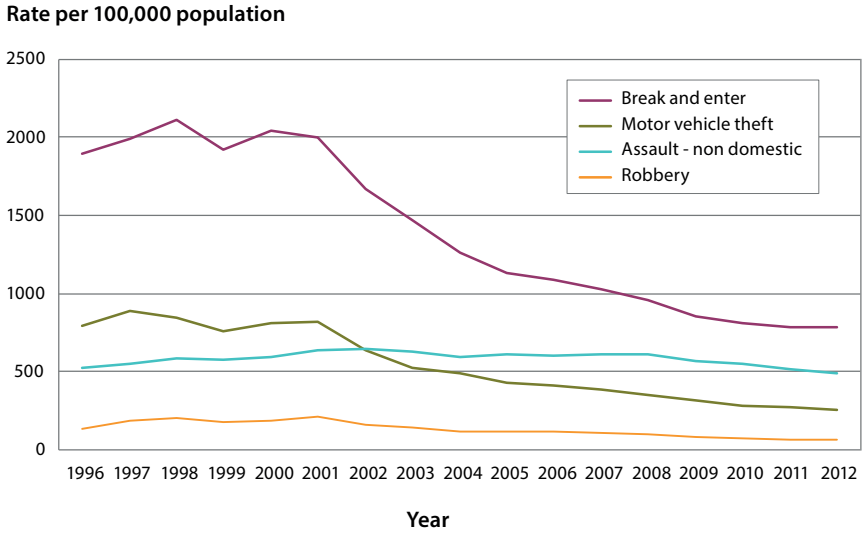
Keywords: *Long-term crime trends, New South Wales, age-crime curve, property crime, violent crime, break and enter, motor vehicle theft, robbery, serious assault.*

Introduction

Robust evidence has emerged of a fall in the rate of property crime and robbery over the past decade in New South Wales (NSW), a finding which is consistent with the national trend in these offences (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2013; Goh & Holmes, 2014). Additionally, it appears that, after a decade of growth in the assault rate throughout the 1990s, and a period of stabilisation in the early 2000s, the non-domestic assault rate in NSW is also in decline (Goh & Holmes, 2014). These trends are shown in Figure 1.

While the fall in crime has attracted some research attention (see, for

Figure 1. Recorded crime for selected offence types, NSW, 1996 to 2012



example, Clancy & Lulham, 2014), to date no-one has examined the question of whether offending frequency has fallen for all age groups or whether the fall in offending is larger for some age groups than others. This is surprising because participation in crime is strongly related to age (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Farrington, 1986). Disaggregation of offending trends by age has been shown to be useful in understanding trends in crime (Blumstein, 2000). The purpose of this report, therefore, is to describe the trends in age-specific rates of offending in NSW for selected property and violence offences from 1995 to 2012.

Method

The age-specific offending rate was calculated by dividing the number of persons of interest (POIs) proceeded against by NSW Police by the number of NSW residents within the same age category for a given year (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013a) and then multiplying the result by 100,000. A person is counted as having been 'proceeded against' if they have been issued with a criminal infringement notice, a formal caution, or if they have been referred to a youth justice conference or to court. Data on POIs proceeded against were sourced from the NSW Police Force's Computerised Operational Policing System.

The total number of POIs is not equal to the number of distinct individuals. If an individual is proceeded against by police for multiple criminal incidents they will be counted multiple times. Furthermore, multiple POIs may be proceeded against for an individual criminal incident. For example, if two persons were proceeded against for an assault, there would be two POIs for the one incident of assault. For the purpose of simplification, POIs will be referred to as 'offenders'. The analysis makes no distinction between male and female offenders. While there is evidence that the rate of female involvement in crime has increased in NSW over the past decade (Holmes, 2014), males still constitute the vast majority of offenders in the criminal justice system. As such, changes to female offending patterns have little effect on overall crime trends.

In what follows we assume that the number of POIs within a given age band is an indicator of the age-specific rate of involvement in crime but it is important to note that the vast majority of property offences, and a large proportion of violent offences, do not result in police initiating proceedings against an offender. In addition, trends in age-specific offending rates can be influenced by changes in public willingness to report crime (as has happened for domestic assault offences) and/or changes in the way police choose to respond to crime (e.g. police may choose to formally caution a juvenile offender rather than proceed by way of arrest).

To minimize these problems, we concentrate on a small range of serious offences where it is safe to assume relative stability in public willingness to report crime and in the way police choose to proceed against offenders. The offences examined are: break and enter (including dwelling and non-dwelling); motor vehicle theft; robbery (including robberies without a weapon, robberies with a firearm and robberies with a weapon not a firearm) and serious non-domestic assaults (including assault occasioning actual or grievous bodily harm).

Results

The age-crime curve

Before examining trends in the age-specific rates of offending, it helps to understand the close relationship between age and offending. Figures 2 and 3 show the age distribution of offenders proceeded against for property (Figure 2) and violent offences (Figure 3) in NSW in 2012. It is clear from both figures that the likelihood of offending increases rapidly from the age of 11 or 12 to about 16 or 17. The distribution of offenders by age declines steeply from the late teenage years until the mid-twenties, after which the declines are more gradual. Offenders between 15 and 20 years of age account for a disproportionate share of offenders proceeded against (47.3% of property offenders and 38.2% of violent offenders). While the age distribution patterns of property and violent offenders are largely similar, the peak in the age distribution occurs slightly earlier for property offenders than it does for violent offenders. The proportion of offenders apprehended for break and enter and motor vehicle theft rose sharply for offenders from 11 or 12 years of age to late adolescence, with 17 year olds accounting for the highest proportion of break and enter offenders (9.3%) and 16 year olds accounting for the highest proportion of motor vehicle theft offenders (10.5%). It is interesting to note, however, that the peak in the age distribution for break and enter offenders was not as sharp or as high as motor vehicle theft offences.

Figure 2. Age distribution of property offenders, NSW, 2012

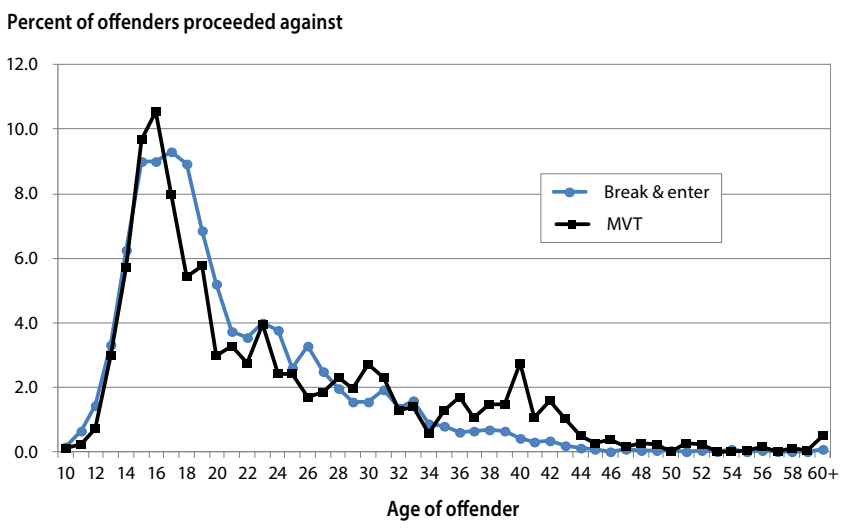


Figure 3. Age distribution of violent offenders, NSW, 2012

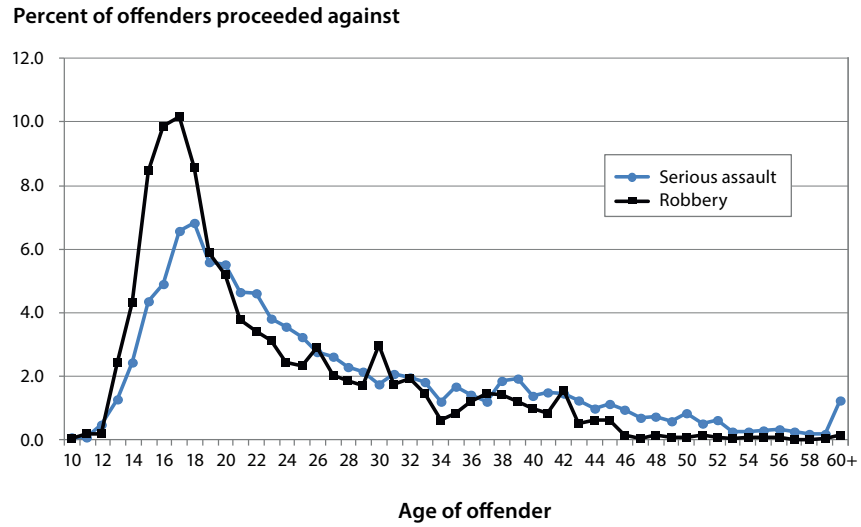


Figure 4. Age specific rates of break and enter for NSW, 1995 to 2012

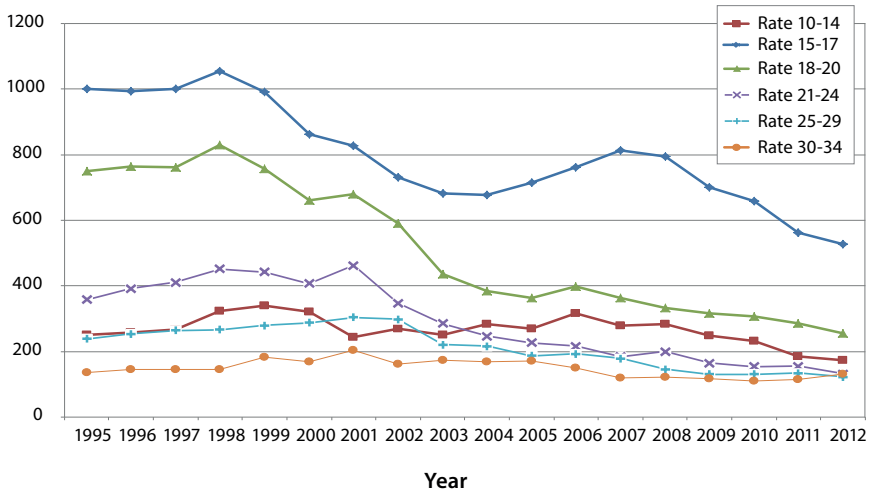


Figure 5. Age specific rates of motor vehicle theft for NSW, 1995 to 2012

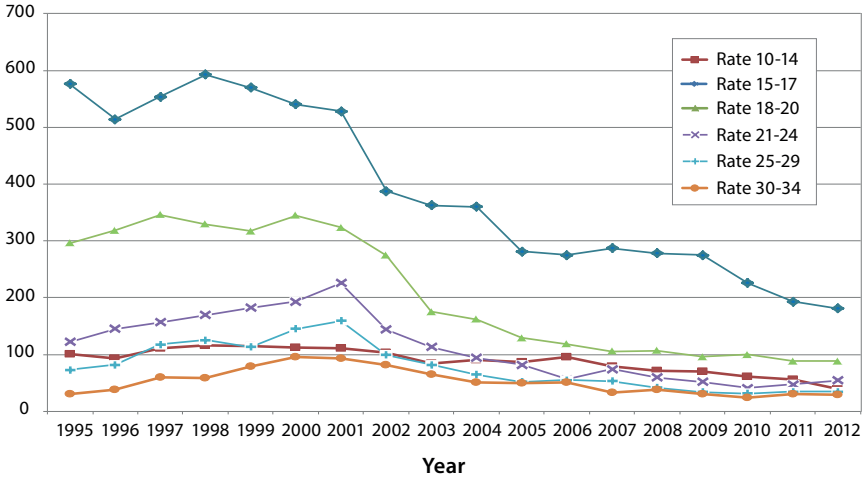


Figure 3 shows a slightly different age distribution for serious assault and robbery offenders. The age distribution of offenders for robbery increases much more sharply than for serious assault. It peaks at 17 years (n.b. this age group accounts for 10.1% of robbery offenders) and then falls sharply until the mid-twenties, after which it declines more gradually. Serious assault follows a similar pattern, however the peak in the distribution is less marked than for robbery and occurs somewhat later (18 year olds account for 6.8% of serious assault offenders). The subsequent decline in offending is also more gradual than for robbery offenders.

Trends in the age-specific rate of offending

To simplify the presentation of data that follows, separate age-specific rates of offending have been calculated for offenders aged 10-14, 15-17, 18-20, 21-24, 25-29 and 30-34. We have excluded offenders aged 35 and older because their age-specific rates of offending are very low and have minimal effect on aggregate trends.

Figure 4 shows trends in age-specific rates of offending for break and enter. The most striking feature of Figure 4 is the large fall in offending between 1998 and 2004 by 15-17 year olds (down 35.8%) and 18-20 year olds (down 53.6%). The peaks in offending occur somewhat later for the older age groups and the decline in rates of offending for these groups is also much less pronounced. There is an unusual surge in rates of offending between 2004 and 2007 amongst those aged 15-17 years, followed by a sharp decline.

Trends in rates of motor vehicle theft are shown in Figure 5. The general pattern here resembles that for break and enter. Declines in age-specific rates of motor vehicle theft are evident for all age groups after 2001. As before, the downward trend is steeper for the younger age groups. The age groups with the largest falls in rates of offending are those aged 15-17 (down 68.6% from 1995 to 2012) and those aged 18-20 (down 70.1% from 1995 to 2012).

Figure 6 shows the offending rates for robbery in NSW, from 1995 to 2012. Rates of offending amongst 15-17 year olds show a rapid increase between 1995 and 1997, slight dip in 1998 and 2000, a peak in 2001 and then a rapid decrease between 2001 and 2004. A similar pattern is observed for 18-20 year olds during the period 1995 to 2004. A more subdued version of the same pattern then occurs between 2004/5 and 2012 for both age groups. The rate of robbery offending by 21-24 year olds rises in tandem with that of the younger age groups but then shows a general decline from 1999 onwards. A similar but even more attenuated trend can be seen for 25-29 year olds. There is no systematic upward or downward trend for 10-14 or 30-34 year olds.

Figure 6. Age specific rates of robbery for NSW, 1995 to 2012

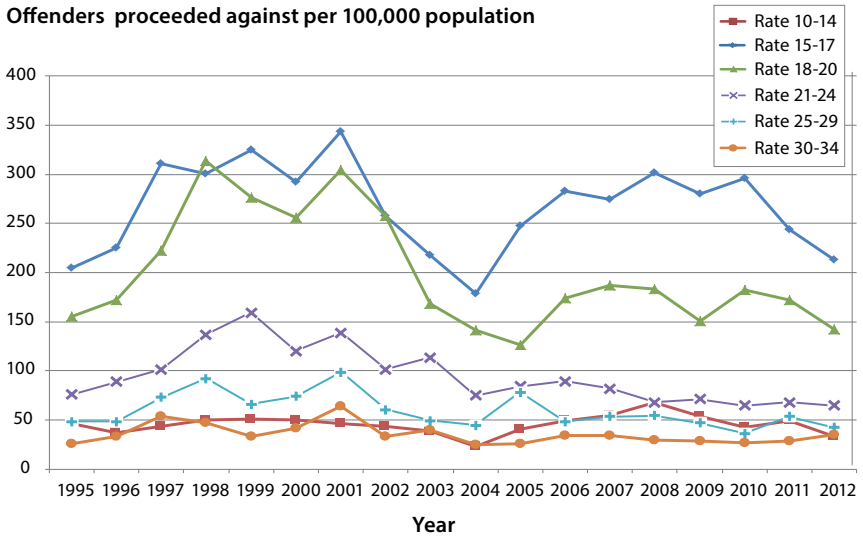
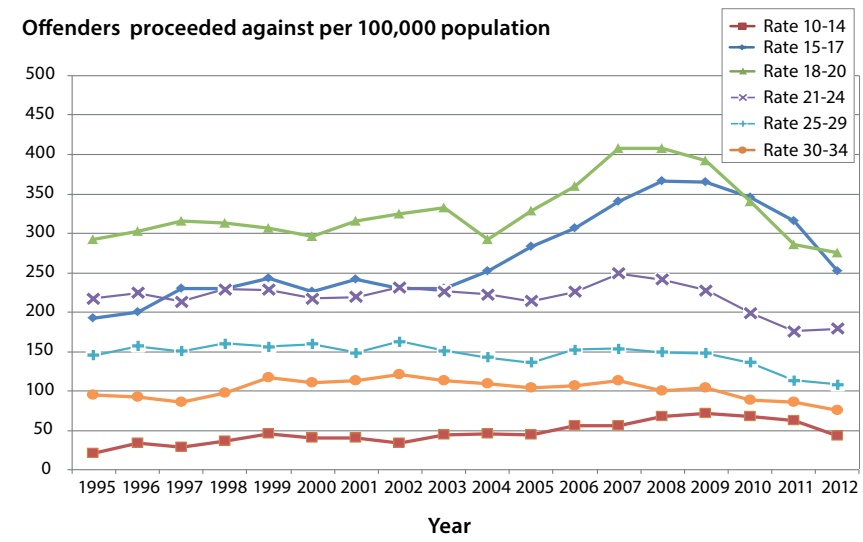


Figure 7 shows the rate of offending for non-domestic serious assaults occasioning actual or grievous bodily harm (ABH, GBH), hereafter referred to as serious assaults.

Figure 7. Age specific rates of serious assault for NSW, 1995 to 2012



The dominant pattern for all age groups is one of stability in the decade after 1995. At this point, trends for the younger and older age groups diverge somewhat. Rates of serious assault for those aged 25-29 and 30-34 years remain stable between 1995 and 2009 before beginning a slow decline. By contrast, between 2004 and 2008 the serious assault rate among 15-17 year olds rose by 45.7 per cent (from 251.8 per 100,000 in 2004 to 366.8 per 100,000 in 2008). This pattern closely mirrors the offending rates of 18-20 year olds, which increased by 39.5 per cent between 2004 and 2008 (from 292.0 per 100,000 in 2004 to 407.4 per 100,000 in 2008). The sharp rise was followed by an equally sharp fall. Between 2009 and 2012, the rate of serious assault among those aged 15-17 years fell by 31.1 per cent (from 365.2 per 100,000 in 2009 to 251.5 per 100,000 in 2012), while the corresponding rate among those aged 18-20 fell by 29.7 per cent (from 392.7 per 100,000 in 2009 to 275.9 per 100,000 in 2012).

Discussion

The findings presented raise three questions of importance concerning the behaviour of offenders in NSW over the last 18 years: (1) what accounts for the dramatic decline in rates of offending for serious property crime (e.g. break and enter, motor vehicle theft)? (2) what accounts for the 'double bulge' in robbery among 18-20 year olds between 1996 and 2003 and, again, between 2004 and 2012?; and (3) what accounts for the surge and then fall in offending rates for serious assault among 18-20 year olds between 2004 and 2012?

The sharp decline in rates of property crime by younger offenders suggests that the number of new recruits to property crime is declining. One possible explanation for this is that the starting point for the decline in offending for theft among the younger age groups coincides with the onset of the heroin shortage; an event which past research suggests played a significant role in precipitating the overall downward trend in property crime in NSW (Wan, Moffatt, Jones & Weatherburn, 2012). The sudden increase in heroin prices in early 2001, coupled with a drop in heroin purity, may have reduced the number of new recruits to heroin use and thereby the volume of property crime being committed (by young heroin users) to raise money to buy heroin.

Important though it is, the heroin shortage is unlikely to be the sole reason for the fall in property crime. For one thing, property

crime continued to decline in NSW long after key indicators of heroin use, such as the number of heroin overdoses, had stabilised at a new lower level (Van Buskirk & Burns, 2013; Goh & Holmes, 2014). For another, several other factors have also emerged as potential causes of the fall in crime. Wan, Moffatt, Jones and Weatherburn (2012) found evidence that the fall in property crime in NSW commencing around 2001 was strongly correlated with the growth in average weekly earnings, the risk of arrest and the likelihood of imprisonment resulting from a conviction. NSW Police have adopted a number of strategies shown in other locations to be effective in controlling crime (Eck & Maguire, 2000; Eck, 2003), including: pro-active targeting of crime hotspots at 'hot' times; pro-active targeting of repeat offenders; programs to prevent repeat victimisation; weapons confiscation; and large-scale DNA testing (NSW 2021, 2011). Clancy and Lulham (2014) have suggested that increased security and criminal opportunity reduction may have also played a role in reducing rates of property crime. Clear-up rates for most categories of property crime have also increased since 2001 (Dunsmuir, Tran & Weatherburn, 2008).

Turning now to robbery, we note that, although it is by definition a violent offence, it shares much in common with the property offences we have just discussed. As with all theft offences, robbery is committed for material gain. It is also frequently committed to obtain money to buy drugs (Hogg, 1987). The rise and fall in rates for robbery from 1995 to 2004 is known to be strongly associated with the rise and fall in heroin use. Indeed, there is some evidence that the spike in robberies in 2001 is attributable to a temporary shift among some heroin users (in response to the heroin shortage) from heroin to cocaine (Moffatt, Weatherburn & Donnelly, 2005). The puzzle here is not so much the rise and fall in offending rates for robbery between 1995 and 2004, as the rise and fall in robbery offending rates between 2005 and 2012. Unlike the first 1995 to 2004 surge and subsequent decline in offending rates for robbery, the second rise and fall (i.e. 2005 to 2012) was not reflected in the reported robbery rate, which steadily declined from 2001 onwards for all types of robbery (Goh & Holmes 2014). These findings militate against any explanation in terms of factors influencing trends in crime (e.g. opportunity reduction, drug use, economic stress). One possibility is that, for some reason (e.g. DNA testing, better use of CCTV) police effectiveness in identifying and arresting robbery offenders improved from 2004 onwards, producing a temporary surge in offenders proceeded against by police followed by a drop in both offenders proceeded against by police and crime.

The surge in offending of young people for serious assault from 2003 to 2008 coincided with a steep rise in the number of NSW hospital attendances for acute alcohol problems amongst 18-24 year olds (NSW Health 2014). It also coincided with a rapid growth in consumption of certain ready-mixed drinks (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013b), popularly known as 'alcopops' and a rise in the proportion of ABH and GBH assaults that were deemed by police to be alcohol-related (see Appendix 1). The fall in offending for serious assault between 2008 and 2012 followed the introduction of more stringent liquor licensing laws and the commencement of more vigorous liquor licensing enforcement (Moffatt & Weatherburn, 2011; Menendez, Tusell & Weatherburn, 2014). It also coincided with a fall in the number of NSW hospital attendances for acute alcohol problems amongst 18-24 year olds (NSW Health, 2014) and a fall in the proportion of ABH and GBH assaults that were deemed by police to be alcohol-related (see Appendix 1). This suggests that the surge and decline in offending of young people for serious assault between 2003 and 2012 may have been driven by changing patterns in alcohol consumption.

The current research underscores three points of importance for those involved in crime prevention and criminal justice administration. The first is that the number of young people entering the pool of property offenders would appear to be far lower now than it was back in 1995. This augurs well for a continuing fall in the rate of property crime in NSW. The second is that the proportion of young people aged 15-20 involved in crime has changed much more dramatically than the proportion in older age groups who are involved in crime. They exhibited the most dramatic falls in offending rates, but also the most rapid increases (where increases occurred). The third is that, while age-specific arrest rates for property crime, robbery and assault do tend to follow crime rates, the relationship between the two is not invariant. As the surge in people proceeded against for robbery between 2004 and 2010 indicates, arrest and crime rates can occasionally trend in opposite directions. This is a timely reminder that trends in recorded crime do not always provide a reliable guide to the future workload of the criminal justice system.

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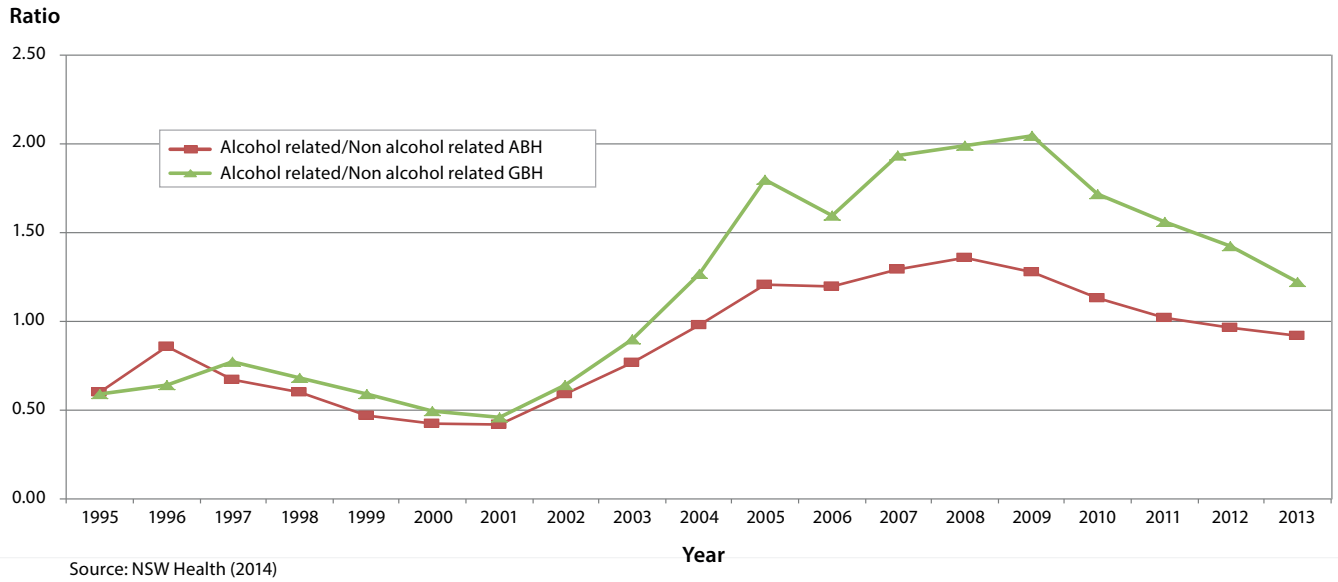
Appendix

Figure A1. Trends in the ratio of alcohol-related to non-alcohol-related arrests for assault, NSW, 1995 to 2013



Source: NSW Health (2014)

Table A1. Number and rate of break and enter offenders proceeded against by age group, 1995 to 2012

	Number of offenders proceeded against						Rate of offenders proceeded against per 100,000					
	Age group						Age group					
Year	10-14	15-17	18-20	20-24	25-29	30-34	10-14	15-17	18-20	20-24	25-29	30-34
1995	1080	2494	1918	1373	1089	671	251.6	1000.6	749.0	357.4	238.3	135.3
1996	1111	2517	1928	1470	1193	706	256.8	993.0	763.6	392.0	253.9	144.2
1997	1164	2552	1904	1486	1274	705	268.2	1000.7	761.3	410.3	264.4	146.3
1998	1405	2717	2071	1585	1295	684	322.6	1054.6	830.8	451.4	266.0	144.4
1999	1490	2570	1907	1523	1368	864	339.6	990.9	756.3	442.7	279.3	183.2
2000	1425	2267	1696	1387	1403	803	321.4	862.5	660.4	406.9	287.2	169.0
2001	1092	2203	1795	1579	1447	995	243.1	827.3	679.4	462.7	303.8	203.0
2002	1218	1957	1573	1203	1389	816	269.1	730.4	589.6	347.0	298.6	162.5
2003	1138	1823	1176	1011	1012	878	250.4	683.1	435.7	285.5	221.1	172.6
2004	1289	1804	1041	893	978	854	283.6	677.0	385.3	247.1	216.0	168.2
2005	1225	1925	979	831	845	866	270.0	714.7	362.3	226.2	186.8	171.7
2006	1430	2079	1074	809	885	735	317.2	762.0	399.1	216.2	192.5	149.2
2007	1250	2243	996	701	846	575	278.6	814.2	364.2	184.0	179.1	118.9
2008	1266	2187	946	775	718	588	283.4	795.0	333.4	199.3	146.1	122.4
2009	1109	1918	920	656	668	563	248.7	701.2	316.7	164.7	131.0	116.4
2010	1036	1810	889	616	677	533	232.6	659.6	307.6	153.8	130.3	109.0
2011	830	1545	814	625	703	575	186.1	563.6	286.6	155.5	134.5	115.4
2012	768	1451	727	533	643	665	172.6	528.2	256.5	131.3	122.1	130.3

Table A2. Number and rate of motor vehicle theft offenders proceeded against by age group, 1995 to 2012

	Number of offenders proceeded against						Rate of offenders proceeded against per 100,000					
	Age group						Age group					
Year	10-14	15-17	18-20	21-24	25-29	30-34	10-14	15-17	18-20	21-24	25-29	30-34
1995	435	1437	759	469	334	150	101.3	576.5	296.4	122.1	73.1	30.2
1996	401	1303	804	545	386	188	92.7	514.1	318.4	145.3	82.1	38.4
1997	482	1413	866	568	568	286	111.1	554.1	346.3	156.8	117.9	59.3
1998	506	1527	821	595	612	280	116.2	592.7	329.4	169.4	125.7	59.1
1999	502	1478	800	628	554	371	114.4	569.9	317.3	182.5	113.1	78.7
2000	499	1420	885	658	710	454	112.6	540.3	344.6	193.0	145.3	95.6
2001	501	1406	855	770	758	454	111.5	528.0	323.6	225.7	159.1	92.6
2002	469	1038	732	498	461	410	103.6	387.4	274.4	143.6	99.1	81.7
2003	383	968	473	401	376	333	84.3	362.7	175.2	113.3	82.2	65.5
2004	411	959	437	340	293	261	90.4	359.9	161.7	94.1	64.7	51.4
2005	393	758	349	300	235	247	86.6	281.4	129.2	81.7	51.9	49.0
2006	432	750	318	211	252	251	95.8	274.9	118.2	56.4	54.8	50.9
2007	356	792	288	283	252	160	79.4	287.5	105.3	74.3	53.4	33.1
2008	320	766	304	231	203	185	71.6	278.5	107.1	59.4	41.3	38.5
2009	314	753	278	207	172	145	70.4	275.3	95.7	52.0	33.7	30.0
2010	272	619	288	164	163	118	61.1	225.6	99.7	40.9	31.4	24.1
2011	252	530	251	191	180	154	56.5	193.3	88.4	47.5	34.4	30.9
2012	173	498	251	220	182	147	38.9	181.3	88.6	54.2	34.6	28.8

Table A3. Number of robbery offenders proceeded against by age group, 1995 to 2012

	Number of offenders proceeded against						Rate of offenders proceeded against per 100,000					
	Age group						Age group					
Year	10-14	15-17	18-20	21-24	25-29	30-34	10-14	15-17	18-20	21-24	25-29	30-34
1995	198	511	397	292	222	128	46.1	205.0	155.0	76.0	48.6	25.8
1996	159	571	435	333	228	164	36.8	225.3	172.3	88.8	48.5	33.5
1997	191	793	555	367	352	259	44.0	311.0	221.9	101.3	73.1	53.7
1998	220	775	781	480	449	222	50.5	300.8	313.3	136.7	92.2	46.9
1999	223	842	696	548	324	158	50.8	324.7	276.0	159.3	66.2	33.5
2000	224	769	657	410	362	200	50.5	292.6	255.8	120.3	74.1	42.1
2001	207	914	805	474	471	316	46.1	343.2	304.7	138.9	98.9	64.5
2002	199	691	688	352	282	165	44.0	257.9	257.9	101.5	60.6	32.9
2003	176	580	455	403	226	202	38.7	217.3	168.6	113.8	49.4	39.7
2004	106	475	383	271	202	127	23.3	178.2	141.8	75.0	44.6	25.0
2005	185	667	342	310	354	130	40.8	247.6	126.6	84.4	78.2	25.8
2006	223	771	468	335	223	170	49.5	282.6	173.9	89.5	48.5	34.5
2007	247	756	511	312	254	165	55.1	274.4	186.9	81.9	53.8	34.1
2008	303	830	521	265	268	142	67.8	301.7	183.6	68.1	54.5	29.6
2009	240	766	439	283	240	138	53.8	280.1	151.1	71.0	47.1	28.5
2010	190	811	526	259	189	132	42.7	295.5	182.0	64.6	36.4	27.0
2011	218	668	488	273	279	141	48.9	243.7	171.8	67.9	53.4	28.3
2012	148	586	404	262	223	180	33.3	213.3	142.5	64.5	42.4	35.3

Table A4. Number of serious assault offenders proceeded against by age group, 1995 to 2012

	Number of offenders proceeded against						Rate of offenders proceeded against per 100,000					
	Age group						Age group					
Year	10-14	15-17	18-20	21-24	25-29	30-34	10-14	15-17	18-20	21-24	25-29	30-34
1995	93	481	750	834	663	470	21.7	193.0	292.9	217.1	145.1	94.8
1996	145	507	764	841	737	451	33.5	200.0	302.6	224.3	156.8	92.1
1997	125	588	788	774	724	416	28.8	230.6	315.1	213.7	150.3	86.3
1998	161	593	781	804	780	463	37.0	230.2	313.3	229.0	160.2	97.8
1999	201	629	774	785	766	550	45.8	242.5	307.0	228.2	156.4	116.6
2000	181	595	762	742	779	526	40.8	226.4	296.7	217.7	159.5	110.7
2001	180	642	835	749	709	553	40.1	241.1	316.0	219.5	148.8	112.8
2002	154	617	867	804	756	606	34.0	230.3	325.0	231.9	162.5	120.7
2003	200	613	896	801	692	573	44.0	229.7	331.9	226.2	151.2	112.6
2004	206	671	789	804	646	555	45.3	251.8	292.0	222.5	142.7	109.3
2005	199	764	889	786	615	523	43.9	283.6	329.0	213.9	135.9	103.7
2006	251	836	967	844	701	525	55.7	306.4	359.4	225.6	152.5	106.6
2007	251	938	1116	950	727	548	56.0	340.5	408.1	249.4	153.9	113.3
2008	300	1009	1156	939	733	479	67.1	366.8	407.4	241.4	149.2	99.7
2009	321	999	1141	907	755	505	72.0	365.2	392.7	227.7	148.1	104.4
2010	301	948	982	799	707	432	67.6	345.5	339.8	199.4	136.0	88.4
2011	278	867	813	707	593	428	62.3	316.3	286.3	175.9	113.5	85.9
2012	189	691	782	726	570	384	42.5	251.5	275.9	178.8	108.3	75.2

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