

# Where have all the young offenders gone?

Ben Matthews

## Key points

- The crime drop that has happened in Scotland since the early 1990s is not evenly distributed among offenders.
- There has been a substantial decline in the rate of convictions of people aged 25 or under, in particular young men.
- By contrast, rates of convictions for people over 26 have been mostly stable.
- These changes have not occurred evenly over time. There were substantial drops in rates of convictions for young men (but not young women) between 1989 and 1999, slight increases in convictions for all age groups between 2000 and 2006, then substantial declines in conviction rates for both young men and young women between 2007 and 2012.
- Examining changing patterns of age and crime in Scotland suggests that further work is required to explain this sharp decline in youth convictions.

Since the early 1990s there has been a substantial drop in police recorded crime in Scotland. Court records also show a decline in the total number of convictions, and in the number of people receiving convictions. Less is known about who is (or who is no longer) being convicted of crimes. This Research Briefing examines changing patterns in the age and gender of those convicted in Scotland over the course of the crime drop.

Previous research has indicated that the population of offenders has typical patterns of age and gender composition, with most offenders being teenagers and there being significantly more male offenders than female offenders. However, these patterns change over time (Farrington 1986). The variation in these measures provides useful criteria to assess how the offending population has changed over the course of the crime drop. By analysing the changing rates of conviction for men and women of



The conviction rate for young men has fallen substantially. © Flickr, AndDontYaStop.

different age groups in Scotland (Box 1) we can gain insight into how the offending population in Scotland has changed.

## The crime drop in Scotland

Figure 1 shows the number of individuals convicted in Scotland between 1989 and 2012 and the volume of crime recorded by the police in Scotland over the same period<sup>i</sup>.

These figures are not directly comparable<sup>ii</sup>, as there are a number of different ways in

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### Box 1: The Scottish Offenders Index

The convictions data in this Research Briefing are drawn from the Scottish Offenders Index (SOI). SOI is compiled from court records and contains a record of every individual convicted in a Scottish court between 1989 and 2012. This analysis includes all convictions, regardless of the offence or the sentence received. All figures relate to the date of, and age at, offence not conviction. As a result there may be offences committed in 2012 which had not been processed by the criminal justice system by the time these figures were produced. It is therefore suggested that trends between 2011 and 2012 are interpreted with caution.

The data relates to any conviction in a Scottish court, excluding some more minor offences. These excluded offences are mostly included in the 'offences' category for police recorded crime, making SOI data more – but not entirely – comparable with recorded crime figures. Data were provided by the Scottish Government under a data sharing agreement.

which individuals can be processed by the criminal justice system which do not lead to a conviction in court. However, for the purposes of this study this comparison is intended to show whether declines in police recorded crime are matched by declines in the number of

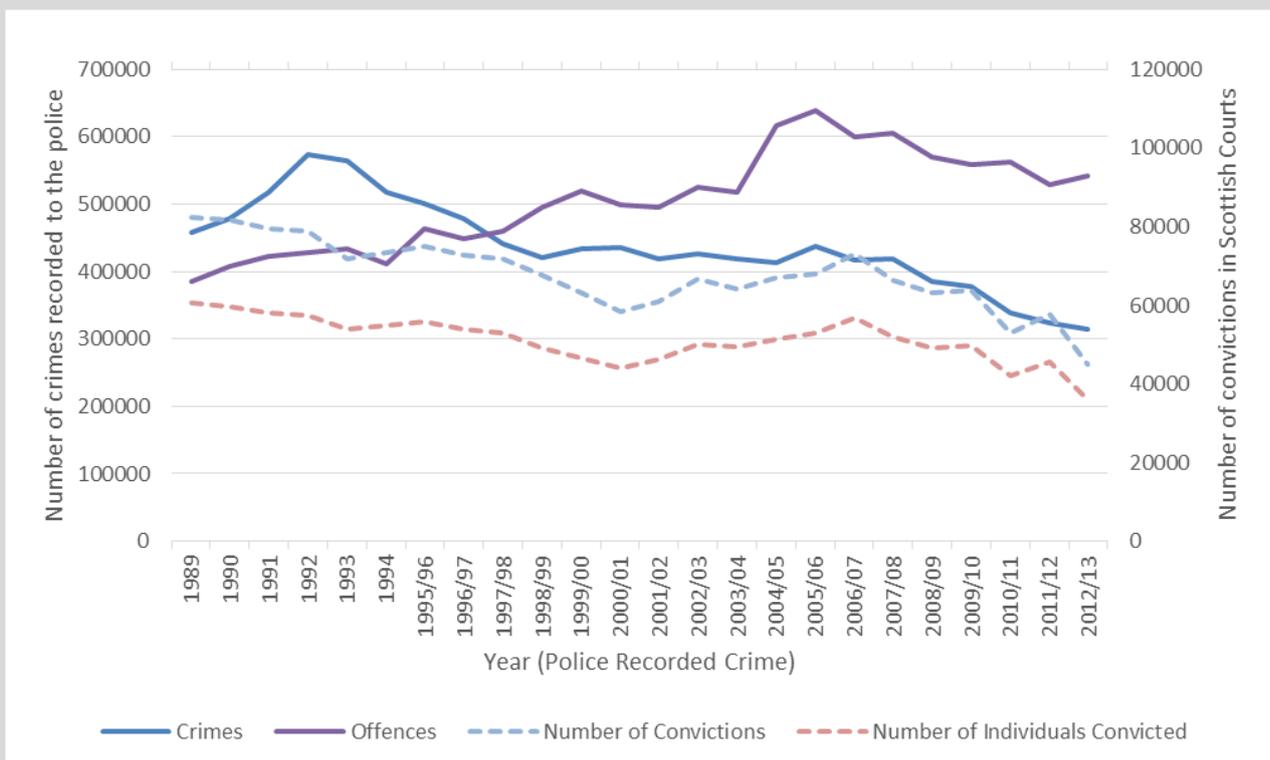
individuals convicted in Scottish courts and Figure 1 suggests that, broadly, trends in convictions and police recorded crime are indeed similar.

Police recorded crime<sup>iii</sup> rises between 1989 and 1992 and then declines until 1998/99. At this point the trend is relatively stable until 2007/08, after which the number of crimes recorded by the police drops again until 2012/13. The number of individuals convicted in Scottish courts declines from 1989 until 2000/1, then increases until 2006/7. From 2007/8 the number of individuals convicted declines until 2012/13. Whilst this trend lacks the distinctive peak in 1992 as shown in the police recorded crime statistics, and contains a rise between 2000/1 and 2006/7, at which point the trend for recorded crime is broadly flat, the two trends are on the whole similar throughout the period of the crime drop. When we split the trends in convictions by age and sex, however, different patterns emerge across the population of offenders.

### Divergent trends across age and sex

Figure 2 presents the rate of men and women convicted in Scotland per 100,000 population<sup>iv</sup> split by age band. As expected, for both men and women younger age groups have higher conviction rates than older groups. Examining convictions rates for these groups over time, however, shows that the overall drop in convictions<sup>v</sup>

**Fig 1: Police recorded crime (left) and convictions (right) in Scotland both decline between 1989-2012**



shown in Figure 1 masks different trends for men and women of different ages:

- The overall decline in convictions is predominately due to changes in conviction patterns for young men.
- There have been some declines in convictions served to young women, but this decrease is not as marked as that in young men.
- There is less change in rates of convictions of those aged 26 or over.

### There have been substantial declines in young men receiving convictions

Figure 2 shows that the rate of convictions for men aged 16-20 declines from around 9,500 convictions per 100,000 in 1989 to only just over 2,700 convictions per 100,000 in 2012<sup>vi</sup>. Over this period the rate of convictions for men aged 16-20 drops from being the highest (by some distance) for any age group to being the third highest in 2012/13. The decline in the rate of convictions for the 21-25 group is not as steep as that for the 16-20 group but it is still substantial, declining from around 6,200 individuals per 100,000 receiving convictions in 1989 to fewer than 4,400 in 2012. However, this decline is not evenly distributed between 1989 and 2012. Conviction rates for men aged 16-20 and

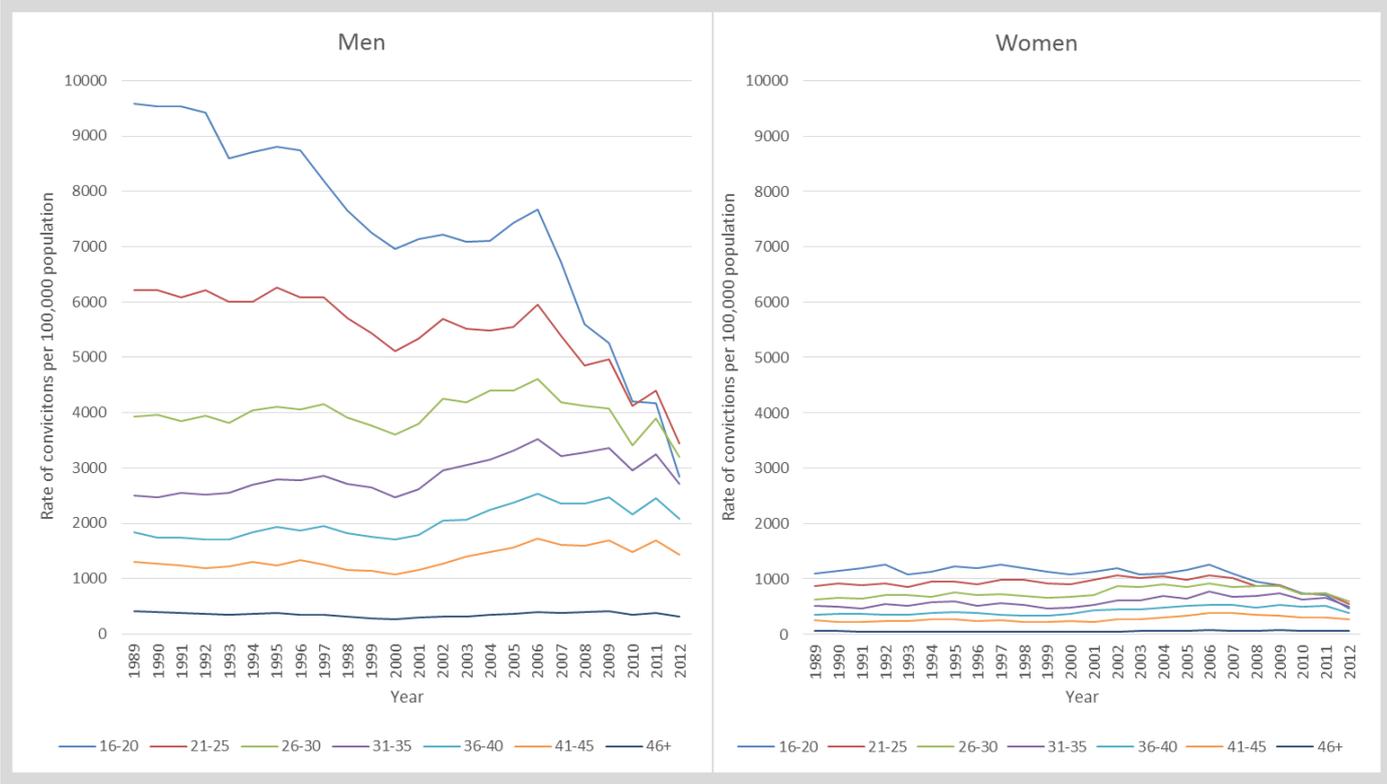
21-25 decline between 1989 and 2000, but then increase until 2006 before declining again until 2012. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the relative size of these groups, the trends for these groups mirror the broad trends outlined for the population as a whole (see Figure 1).

### There have also been some declines in young women receiving convictions

As is immediately apparent from Figure 2, the most striking difference in conviction rates for young men and young women is that the rate of convictions served to young women (and indeed, women of all ages) is substantially lower than that for men. The highest conviction rate of women was 1,259 per 100,000 for 16-20 year olds in 1992. The highest rate for men is 9,580 for 16-20 year olds in 1989, more than seven and a half times higher than that for women. Figure 2 also shows that the decline in conviction rates for young men between 1989 and 1999 is not replicated for young women – but that the decline between 2006 and 2012 *is*.

Taken together these results show that, whilst there is an overall drop in convictions for young people between both 1989-1999 and 2007-2012, these two declines in conviction rates have distinct patterns; the first decline

**Fig 2: Declines in the conviction rates for young men in Scotland between 1989 and 1999 are not seen in other groups, but both young women and young men show declines in convictions from 2007 to 2012**



almost exclusively represents declines in the number of young men receiving convictions, whilst the second is shared by both young men and young women.

### **There has been less change in convictions for those aged 26 or over**

Returning to Figure 2, if we compare the trends for the younger age groups with the trends for those over 26 we can see that the trends for both men and women aged 26 or over are mostly stable between 1989 and 1999, and show only slight declines between 2006 and 2012. The decline in overall convictions at these times is not reflected in changes in the patterns of convictions for those aged 26 or over – between 1989 and 1999 different age groups showed divergent trends.

### **Conclusions**

This analysis shows that the drop in crime in Scotland since the early 1990s has been accompanied by declines in conviction rates for young people, and especially young men. However, the decline in convictions for young people is not replicated for older men, and the decline in conviction rates for young men is only joined by reduced convictions for young women after 2007. It should be stressed that as this study is purely descriptive it is not possible to draw firm conclusions from this analysis as to what has caused these declines in youth convictions to occur. To do so would require a theoretical understanding of the crime drop, and to date there is little consensus about the causes of the crime drop with a number of different authors suggesting a number of different explanations, such as increased security measures (Farrell 2013) and changes in patterns of drug use (Home Office 2014).

Further theoretical work is required to interpret these patterns and understand what has led to this decline in youth

convictions. As a result, the analysis here raises the question posed in the title, rather than answering it, and it is hoped that this observed association between youth offending and the crime drop may be a useful point of departure for others seeking to explain the crime drop. Whatever factors have led to these declines in conviction rates for young people seems to have left older members of the offending population unaffected.

### **Author**

**Ben Matthews**, PhD Candidate,  
University of Edinburgh.  
b.m.matthews@sms.ed.ac.uk

### **References**

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### **Endnotes**

- i Police recorded crime figures from Recorded Crime in Scotland (Scottish Government, 1997; 2002; 2013).
- ii Figures for police recorded crime refer to crimes recorded in financial years from 1995/96, while the number of convictions relates to calendar years throughout.
- iii The number of offences recorded by the police shows a strikingly different pattern than that for recorded crimes. Given the nature of the convictions data used there is more overlap between the figures for police recorded crimes and convictions data.
- iv Population estimates from National Records of Scotland (2014) Mid-year population estimates: Scotland and its Council areas by single year of age and sex: 1981 to 2013.
- v This briefing does not consider patterns of age and sex during the increase in convictions between 2000 and 2006.
- vi Although estimates of rates for 2012 may be biased due to offences not yet being processed by courts.



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### **Applied Quantitative Methods Network**

The University of  
Edinburgh  
Flat 2.50  
15 Buccleuch Place  
Edinburgh  
EH8 9LN

www.aqmen.ac.uk  
@aqmennetwork  
info@aqmen.ac.uk  
0131 651 5536