

## **Criminal careers and the crime drop: influencing Scotland's youth justice strategy**

- There was a dramatic reduction in criminal convictions in Scotland between 1989 and 2011 which was predominantly driven by a fall in conviction rates for young people, especially young men
- There was a particular drop in the number of young people with a high volume of convictions over this period
- Conviction rates for those age 26-40 increased between 1989 and 2011 and an increasing proportion of this age group had a high volume of convictions
- The increase in conviction rates for those over 25 is explained both by people originally convicted as teenagers continuing to be convicted over a longer period and more people receiving their first conviction after age 25
- These research findings were used in the development of Scotland's Justice and Youth Justice strategies

### **Background**

Since the early 1990s, crime has been falling in many countries in Western Europe, including Scotland. As crime is committed by people, this 'crime drop' means that either fewer people are offending, or that people who do offend are offending less frequently.

It is difficult to examine people's patterns of offending over time as there are too few repeated surveys on self-reported offending. However, using administrative data, it is possible to examine how patterns of conviction have changed over the period of the crime drop as a proxy measure of people's changing behaviour.

### **Research question**

From the early 1990s onwards there was a dramatic fall in police recorded crime in Scotland. This coincided with a significant fall in convictions in the Scottish courts between 1989 and 2011 as measured by the Scottish Offender's Index (SOI).

This raises the question of whether the overall drop in crime (as measured by convictions) was evenly distributed across the offender population or whether it was due to a change in behaviour within one particular group.

### **Summary of research**

To explore this question, AQMeN PhD Student Ben Matthews used the SOI to analyse the change in patterns of convicted offending in Scotland between 1989 and 2011. The SOI is an ideal data source as it provides a record of all people convicted in the Scottish courts for committing crimes or offences, excluding motor vehicle offences.

Using a 'criminal careers' approach (which examines the

relationship between age and crime), Ben examined the changing age structure of those who were convicted of crimes in Scotland. He also examined whether the age profile of convictions differed for men and women.

The analysis involved a combination of data visualization to examine change over time in conviction patterns and statistical modelling to identify typical groups of people in the SOI based on their pattern of convictions.

The results showed that the overall reduction in the number of convictions in Scotland was due to a large reduction in the rate of convicted offending amongst young people aged between 16 and 25. The conviction rate for 17 year-old men fell by 63% between 1989 and 2011, and fell by 37% for 17 year-old women. However, conviction rates for those between 25 and 40 increased over this period, rising by 21% for 30 year-old men and 53% for 30 year-old women.

These changes in convictions patterns did not occur smoothly over time. Falling conviction rates between 1989 and 2000 were driven primarily by fewer convictions served to young men. However, overall conviction rates increased from 2000 to 2007 due principally to increasing conviction rates for those over the age of 25. Conviction rates fell again from 2007 to 2011, driven by declining conviction rates for young men and women.

### Implications for policy

By taking Scotland as a case study, this analysis can help to understand why crime has fallen in many countries. Whilst convictions data does not perfectly measure offending behaviour, as a proxy the dramatic change in the pattern of convictions suggests that there has been a marked reduction in offending by young people, and young men in particular.

These findings have significant implications for the criminal justice system, which is increasingly dealing with an 'ageing' population of offenders. They suggest that policies aimed at crime prevention and reduction need to focus more strategically on older offenders.

This research also found that the rate of change in convictions varied according to different policy eras in Scotland. In particular, it found that a period of punitive justice policy delayed, and in the case of older offenders reversed, the declining trend in convictions. This suggests that criminal justice policies aimed at targeting and punishing offenders may simply increase the convicted population through a process of net widening.

### Impact

Early results from this project were disseminated at AQMeN's ESRC Festival of Social Science event *The Changing Nature of Crime in Scotland* in November 2014. Representatives from the Scottish Government Justice Directorate attended this event and subsequently used the findings in internal research about changing youth crime. These findings were cited in the 2015 revision of Scotland's Youth Justice Strategy.

Results from this project also informed the development of Scotland's revised Justice Strategy, due to be published in June 2017, as part of the evidence base regarding diversion from prosecution.

### Next steps

The Scottish Government has been a key stakeholder throughout this research project, and two further reports will be produced to provide a summary of the results for policy-makers. We will also produce an overview of the methods used in this analysis Government statisticians.

There is existing evidence that policy makers are using AQMeN research (highlighted above) and discussions are in progress with the Scottish Government to extend the analysis described here to examine trends in the use of different court disposals over the course of the crime drop in Scotland.

***"The findings have strengthened our rationale for current policies... and will help to develop a shared, evidence-based understanding of what has driven conviction patterns over previous years and provide a strong basis for our policies going forward."***

Dr Catherine Bissett, Principal Researcher at the Scottish Government.

The project was undertaken by Ben Matthews as part of his doctoral research and was jointly funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Scottish Government.

Find out more about the AQMeN research on crime mentioned in this case study:

AQMeN research briefing 4: *Where have all the young offenders gone?* Ben Matthews, November 2014 - <https://www.aqmen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/RB4-young-offenders.pdf>

AQMeN Festival of Social Science Presentation (video) *Where have all the young offenders gone?* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBWSCzIPC-g>

*Rethinking one of criminology's 'brute facts': The age-crime curve and the crime drop in Scotland* (Matthews and Minton, forthcoming and will be available via the AQMeN website)

Find out more at [www.aqmen.ac.uk](http://www.aqmen.ac.uk) or contact [info@aqmen.ac.uk](mailto:info@aqmen.ac.uk)