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Trends in Indigenous offending NSW: 2001-2015

Don Weatherburn and Stephanie Ramsey

Aim: To describe trends in Indigenous arrest rates in New South Wales for property and violent offences.

Method: Descriptive analysis of overall and age-specific trends for property and violent crime.

Results: Over the last 15 years in NSW the rate of Indigenous arrest for violent offences has declined by nearly 37 per cent (36.81%), while the rate of Indigenous arrest for property crime has declined by almost 33 per cent (32.95%). The falls are apparent for both males and females but are most pronounced among Indigenous arrests for violent crime for males aged 15-19 (down 55.96%) and those aged 20-24 (down 58.44%).

Conclusion: If these trends continue, rates of Indigenous imprisonment may stabilize or grow less rapidly than in the past few years.

Keywords: Indigenous arrest, imprisonment, gender, age, offending.

Introduction

It is well known that Indigenous Australians are over-represented in prison and among those arrested by police for serious criminal offences. Weatherburn (2014), for example, found that the Indigenous non-Indigenous arrest rate ratio in NSW in the financial year 2010/2011 ranged between 17.1 for burglary and 1.9 for road traffic and motor vehicle regulatory offences, with Indigenous Australians being six times more likely to be arrested per head of population for any offence than non-Indigenous Australians.

Less well known is the fact that arrest rates for Indigenous Australians in NSW have been falling, both for property crime and violent crime. The fact that this has occurred is a reminder that high rates of offending are not an immutable feature of Indigenous communities. It raises the hope that at some point the Indigenous rate of imprisonment in NSW may begin to fall. The purpose of this brief, therefore, is to briefly summarize the relevant trends for males and females and for different age-groups.

Method

The arrest data for the study were drawn from the NSW Police Crime and Operational Policing System (COPS). For our purposes, an 'arrest' is defined as a Person of Interest proceeded against by police, where the form of the proceeding involves either a caution, an infringement notice, a conference or a court appearance. Trends are expressed in terms of rates per 100,000 of population. Population data were sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

For the purpose of analysis we restricted our attention to selected offences, the arrest rate for which can be regarded as a reasonable proxy for actual offending rates. The offences included in the analysis were homicide, assault, sexual offences, robbery and theft. To simplify the analysis, these offences were grouped into violent offences and property offences, with the former category comprising homicide, non-domestic assault, domestic assault, assault police, sexual assault, indecent assault and other sexual offences, and the latter category comprising robbery, break and enter, motor vehicle theft, stealing from a motor vehicle, retail theft, stealing from a dwelling, stealing from a person, fraud, receiving/handling stolen goods and other theft.

Results

Figure 1 shows the rates of Indigenous arrest for violent and property offences between 2001 and 2015. Over the last 15 years in NSW the rate of Indigenous arrest for violent offences has declined by nearly 37 per cent (36.81%), while the rate of Indigenous arrest for property crime has declined by almost 33 per cent (32.95%).

Figures 2 and 3 show, respectively, the rates of arrest for violent and property crime for Indigenous males (Figure 2) and Indigenous females (Figure 3). Male arrests for violent offences have fallen by nearly 40 per cent (39.66%) while male arrests for property crime have fallen by just under 37 per cent (36.78%). The trends for males mirror the overall trends because the vast majority of Indigenous arrests involve Indigenous males.

The rate of Indigenous female arrest has declined as well (down 28.11% for violent crime and 23.18% for property crime). The downward trend for Indigenous females, however, is more uneven. The arrest rate for property crime declined substantially between 2001 and 2004, remained comparatively steady up until 2011 and has shown a slight upward trend since then. The arrest rate for violent offences remained comparatively steady between 2001 and 2011 but has shown a sharp downward trend since then.

To get some insight into what is driving these trends, we now examine the age specific rates of arrest for violent and property offences. If the downward trends are more pronounced among younger cohorts than among older cohorts, then other things being equal, we would expect a decline in future years in the rate of adult contact with the criminal justice system. Figure 4 shows the Indigenous male age-specific rates of arrest for property crime between 2001 and 2015 for the five age groups (10-14, 15-19, 20-24, 25-29 and 30-34) that account for the vast majority of arrests.

Figure 1. Rate of Indigenous arrest for violent and property offences: 2001 to 2015

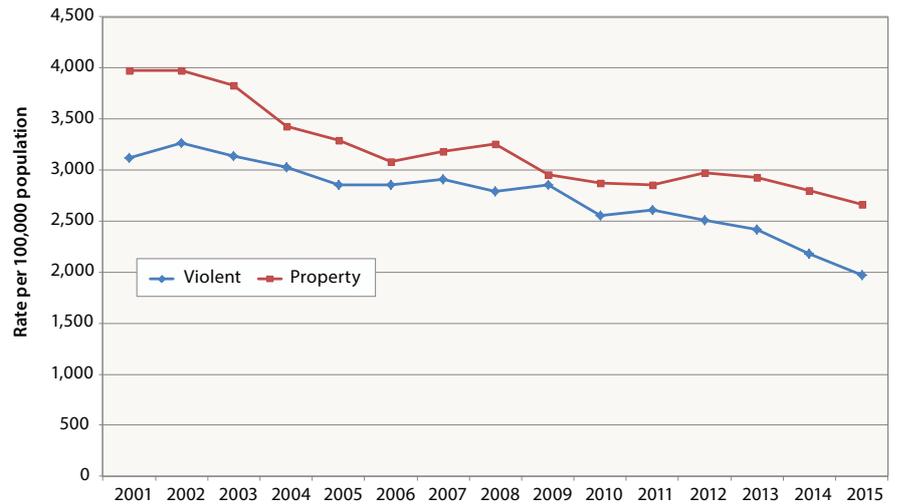


Figure 2. Rate of Indigenous male arrest for violent and property offences: 2001 to 2015

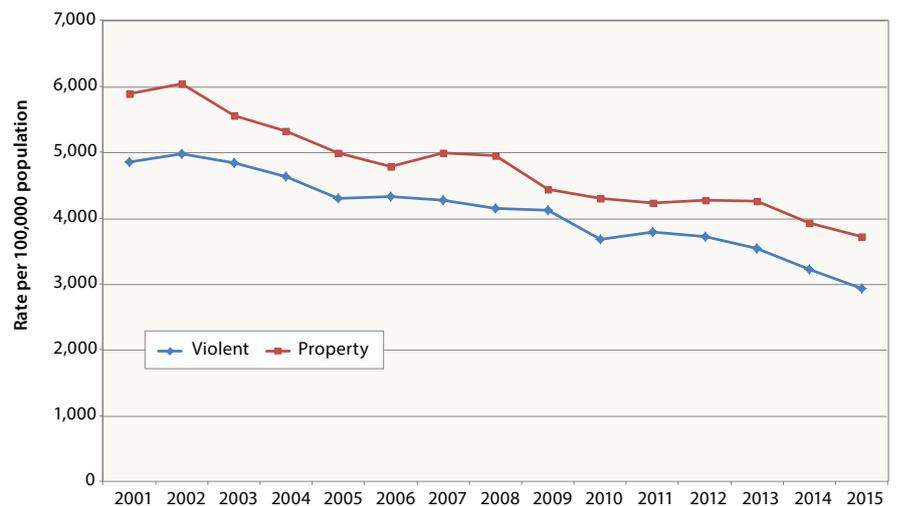


Figure 3. Rate of Indigenous female arrest for violent and property offences: 2001 to 2015

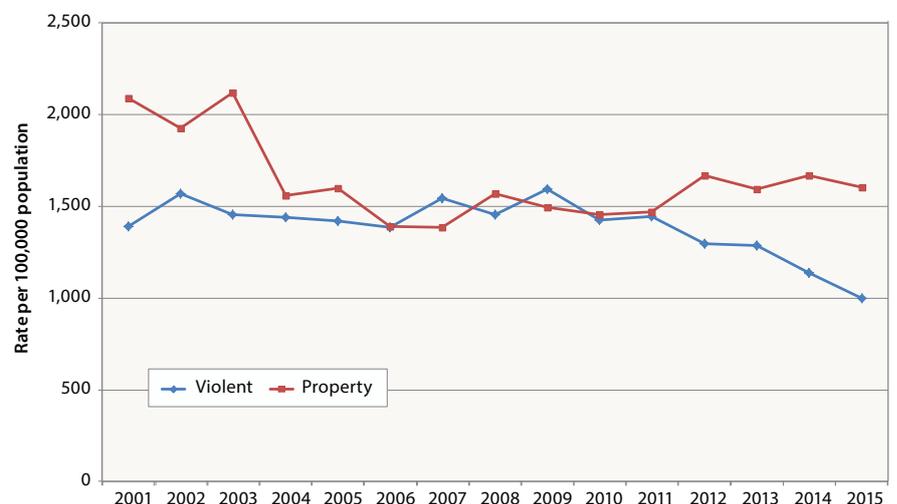
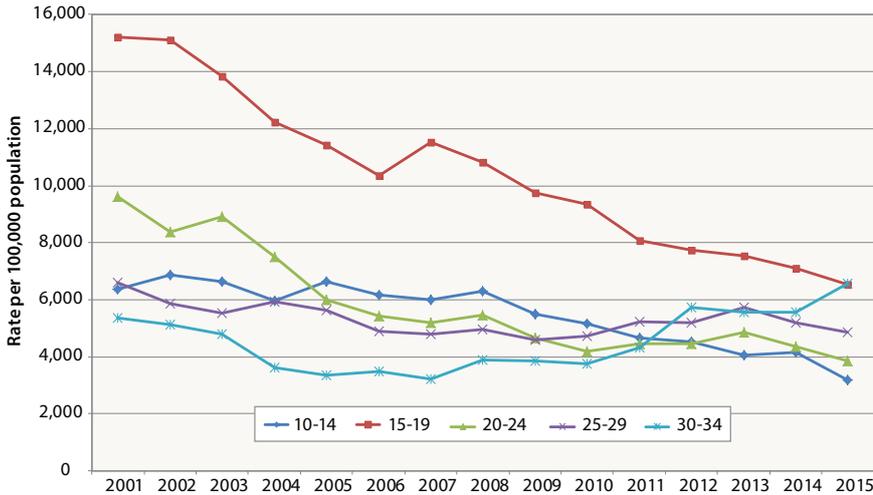


Figure 4. Indigenous age specific rates of arrest for property offences: 2001 to 2015



Rates of Indigenous male arrest for property crime have declined for all age groups (although note the slight increase in rates of arrest for the oldest age group between 2014 and 2015). The steepest declines were for the age groups 15-19 and 20-24. Between 2001 and 2015 rates of arrest for this group for property crime more than halved (down 60.35% for those aged 15-19 and 56.99% for those aged 20-24).

Figure 5 shows rates of Indigenous male arrest for violent crime. All age groups except those aged 10-14 have shown a substantial decline but, once again the steepest declines have been for those aged 15-19 (down 55.96%) and those aged 20-24 (down 58.44%).

Figure 5. Indigenous male age specific rates of violent offences: 2001 to 2015

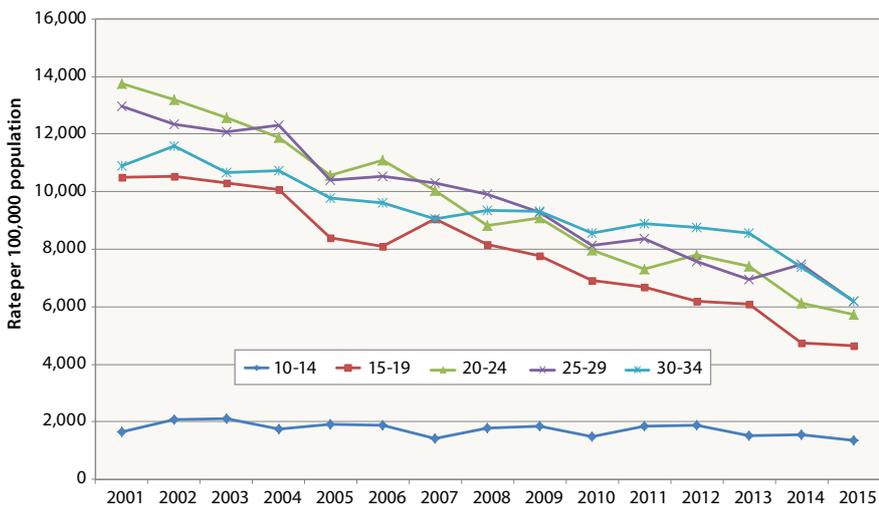
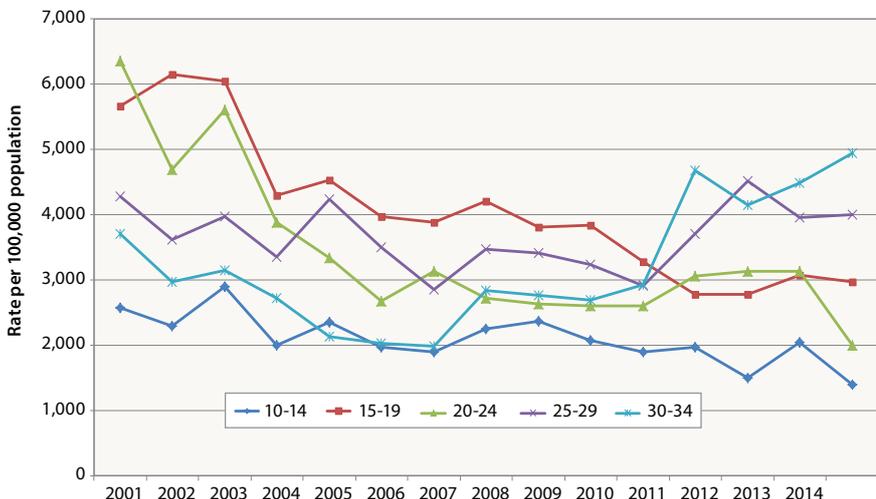


Figure 6 and 7 show the age specific rates of arrest for Indigenous women for property offences (Figure 6) and violent offences (Figure 7).

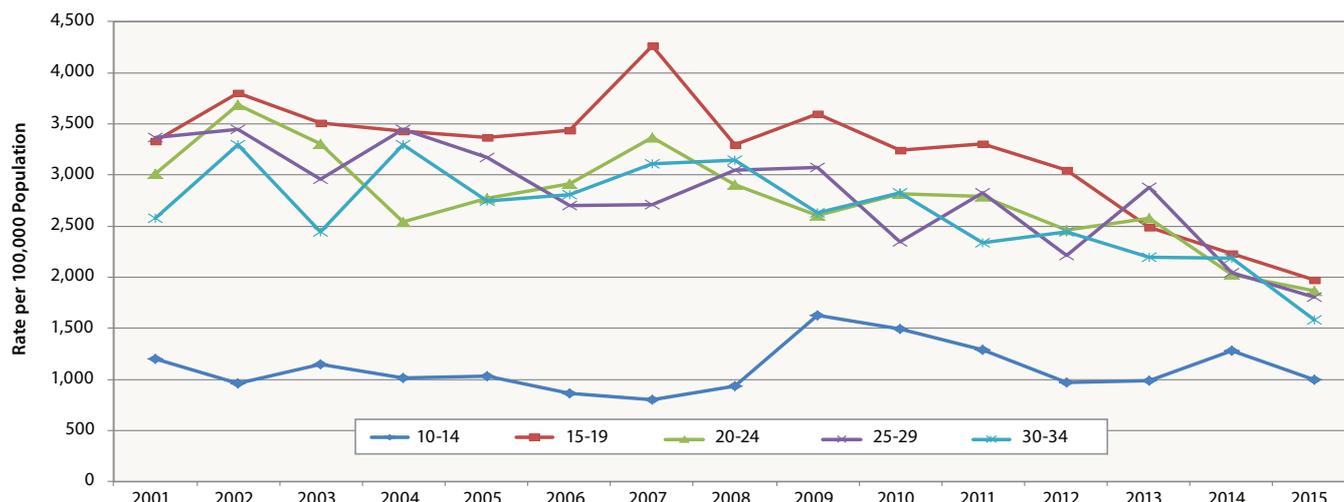
The trends for Indigenous women are more volatile due to the much smaller numbers of arrests. Rates of arrest for property crime declined for three age groups (10-14: down 45.39%, 15-19: down 47.57% and 20-24: down 68.66%). However rates of arrest for the 30-34 age group increased (up 33.58%). Although the data are not shown here, the upward trend in arrests for property crime in this age group was due to increases in arrests for fraud, break and enter (non-dwelling) and stealing from a retail store.

Figure 6. Indigenous female age specific arrest rates for property offences: 2001 to 2015



Age specific rates of Indigenous female arrest for violent offences fell for most age groups (15-19: down 40.64%, 20-24: down 37.90%, 25-29: down 46.37% and 30-34: down 38.48%). There are, however, two noteworthy features of the trends for Indigenous females arrested for violent offences. Firstly, although the rate of arrest for 10-14 year old females was 17.4 lower in 2015 than it had been in 2001, the trend over the intervening years is essentially flat except for a temporary increase between 2009 and 2011. Secondly,

Figure 7. Indigenous female age specific rates of violent offences: 2001 to 2015



unlike the trend for Indigenous males arrested for violent offences, which declined steadily from 2001 onwards, the trend for Indigenous females did not begin trending down until around 2009.

Summary & conclusion

Rates of arrest of Indigenous Australians in NSW have declined significantly since 2001.

Over the last 15 years in NSW the rate of Indigenous arrest for violent offences has declined by nearly 37 per cent (36.81%), while the rate of Indigenous arrest for property crime has declined by almost 33 per cent (32.95%). The falls are apparent for both males and females but are most pronounced among Indigenous arrests for violent crime for males aged 15-19 (down 55.96%) and those aged 20-24 (down 58.44%). These are the peak age groups for offending and if they continue, rates of Indigenous imprisonment may stabilize or grow less rapidly than in the past.

There are a number of possible explanations for the decline in Indigenous offending. Australia as a whole has experienced sharp declines in property and violent crime since 2001. Past research suggests that improvements in the economy between 2001 and 2009 played a substantial role, along with the decline in heroin use and increases in the risk of arrest (Wan, Moffitt, Jones & Weatherburn, 2012). Other possible influences include a decline in alcohol consumption by young people, increased security and a decline in the value of stolen goods (Weatherburn, Halstead & Ramsey, in press).

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