

# **The Effect of Female Social Position on Geographic Variations in the Sex Ratio of Arrests**

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The area of female criminality has historically attracted little attention from criminologists,<sup>1</sup> and remains one in which few systematic empirical studies have been conducted. One point that has been firmly established, however, is that male arrest rates surpass female arrest rates in all societies and in all historical periods for which reliable data are available.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, explanations for this differential remain controversial and at the forefront of current issues in the field. This paper explores the effect of geographic variations in the social position of women on the ratio of female to male arrests.

While arrest statistics cannot be interpreted as a valid measure of actual rates of criminality, variations in the ratio of female to male arrests have been observed both across time and across different geographic locations. Across time, nationwide arrest data for the United States show female arrests have risen from 10.9 percent of all arrests in 1960,<sup>3</sup> (p. 183) to a 1978 figure of 15.8 percent.<sup>4</sup> (p. 197) Analysis of such temporal variations necessitates the use of a longitudinal research design and time series data. On the other hand, there are wide variations in the sex ratio of arrests that can be observed at any one point in time. In Belgium for example, there are approximately 350 male criminals for each female offender, whereas in Algiers and Tunis males outnumber female offenders by a ratio of approximately 2750:1.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, the sex ratio of arrests tends to be lower in rural areas than in large cities.<sup>4</sup> Analysis of such geographic variations at one point in time requires the use of cross sectional designs. In this paper, cross sectional data will be used to assess the possibility that spatial variations in the sex ratio of arrests are related to differences in the social position of women in an area.

## **Theoretical Background**

At least three conventional perspectives in law and psychiatry have been used to explain the low ratio of female to male arrests. Women were first seen as inherently more moral and religious than men,<sup>5</sup> an idea reflected today by the notion that female offenders suffer primarily

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from a lack of morality. Female delinquents are often assumed to be sexually promiscuous; in many jurisdictions today pelvic examinations are ordered by the court to ascertain a defendant's chastity.<sup>6,7</sup> A second conventional approach suggests that female criminality can be traced to biological or physiological roots.<sup>8</sup> This position is evident today in approaches positing chromosomal predispositions,<sup>9</sup> or body types<sup>10</sup> as explanations for the lower rates of female arrests. A third perspective focuses on gender-related psychological characteristics, with "normal" women depicted as psychologically maternal, passive, dependent, emotional, manipulative, devious, or deceptive.<sup>11-14</sup> As has been elaborated elsewhere,<sup>15-17</sup> each of these explanations for the low sex ratio of arrests suffers from a lack of systematic consideration of the political and historical factors which affect the social position of women.

Focusing on this omission, a fourth perspective on the disproportion of female and male arrests has recently emerged which calls attention to differential sex role expectations and constraints.<sup>17-20</sup> According to this viewpoint, female criminality differs in its manifestation and degree, but not its basic etiology.<sup>21</sup> Low sex ratios of arrests are primarily attributed to female role scripts in western societies, which include a number of structurally rooted expectations and constraints that make arrests of females less likely. Whereas women are primarily responsible for family functioning, the bulk of the economic responsibilities, some of which may lead to criminality, are disproportionately assigned to men. Such gender role expectations lead to lower rates of criminality among women because of differential opportunities for crime,<sup>19</sup> as well as differential levels of frustration and pressure associated with economic responsibilities. Thus, the political and social subordination of women is posited as a key determinant of the low sex ratio of arrests. Furthermore, sex role stereotypes can affect law enforcement patterns: the suspicion of police officers which precedes their decision to arrest is influenced by the community expectations they reflect about the patterns of possible and probable behavior by women.<sup>22</sup> In areas where men and women are less constrained by traditional sex roles, the police might look at both genders with equal suspicion. Thus, a major influence on geographic variations in the sex ratio of arrests is the prevailing sex role stereotypes in an area.

Such ecological differences in sex role stereotypes can be expected to vary with the social position of women in an area. By "social position" we refer to the collective economic, educational, and occupational characteristics of women in an area, as measured by women's median income, median educational attainment, and labor force participation. Insofar as these measures encompass ecological differences in gender role expectations, role models for women, and stereotypes of probable female behavior, measures of the aggregate social position of women are more general and inclusive than indicators of socio-economic status. As Oppenheimer has shown, increases in the social position of women,

particularly in labor force participation, have made possible a gradual reduction in normative restrictions on gender role expectations.<sup>23</sup> To the extent that women deviate from traditional sex roles by working outside the home, attitudes toward women's roles tend to be less restrictive,<sup>24,25</sup> and more opportunities for criminality may be encountered.<sup>19</sup> In areas where women fill a relatively larger number of economic roles outside the home, their role expectations, including those reflected by the police and other agents of social control, will be less monolithic and constrictive. Thus, we expect the ratio of female to male arrests will be higher in areas where women have achieved a relatively higher social position.

According to some researchers,<sup>26,27</sup> the social position of women affects not only the ratio of female to male arrests, but also the types of crimes in which women are most likely to participate. Called the "liberation theory" of female crime,<sup>28</sup> this perspective views differences in the social position of women as causally associated with substantive variations in the predominant forms of female criminality. In applying this notion to historical changes in the sex ratio of arrests, Adler has argued that the so-called women's movement has led to "The Rise of the New Female Criminal."<sup>26</sup> In her words:

Like her sisters in legitimate work, the female criminal is fighting for her niche in the hierarchy. She knows too much to return to her former role as a second-rate criminal, confined to such "feminine" crimes as shoplifting and prostitution.<sup>27</sup> (p. 42)

This hypothesis lends itself to testing with cross sectional data. If Adler is correct, the types of crimes for which women are arrested in areas where their collective social position is relatively high will be qualitatively different from areas where their social position is lower. Thus, according to Adler, the number of females arrested for "traditional" female crimes, such as prostitution, runaway, and larceny, relative to arrests of women for non-traditional female crimes, should decrease as the social position of women increases. This hypothesis will be tested below.

Specifying the relationship between the social position of women and the sex ratio of arrests necessitates controlling for the size of the community, which might be intercorrelated with both the measures of social position and arrest ratios. Whereas 12.1 percent of those arrested in rural areas in 1978 in the United States were female, females accounted for 16.5 percent of those arrested in areas of greater than 50,000 residents.<sup>4</sup> (p. 205,223) It would be consistent with the above approach to suggest that role expectations for females in urban areas tend to be less monolithic than in rural areas, thereby making possible a wider range of both non-criminal and criminal behaviors by women. Furthermore, urban areas have a relatively higher police/population

ratio,<sup>4</sup> (p. 223) and more highly specialized and trained police. Since arrest rates are in part a function of the resources available to detect crime,<sup>29</sup> police specialization might lead to increases in the sex ratio of arrests by training officers to suspect women as often as they suspect men, and by reducing any hesitancy to arrest women. Wilson, for example, has demonstrated that departments with specialized juvenile units make more arrests of juvenile offenders than departments with non-specialized structures.<sup>30</sup> In smaller communities with non-professionalized police forces, women might be less likely to be suspected, and more likely to be released without formal arrest. Yet, to our knowledge, there have not yet been any empirical studies which have attempted to distinguish the effects of urbanity from the social position of women on variations in the sex ratio of arrests.

### Methodology

The design used in this study compares county by county differences in the state of Michigan in the social position of women and the sex ratio of arrests. With 83 counties, 58,000 square miles, and eight million residents, Michigan provides a sharp contrast from isolated, sparsely populated homogeneous counties in its upper peninsula to the urban metropolis surrounding Detroit. We can think of no unique features of this research setting that would prohibit generalizations to other regions of the United States, or even to the nation as a whole.

Data collected in the 1970 census are used to measure the independent variables. The measure of *urbanity* consists of the percentage of the county's population living in incorporated municipalities of greater than 2,500 residents. The *median income* of women in the county is the median amount of earnings received by women in the labor force. *Education* is measured by the median school years completed by the female residents of the county aged 25 years or older. *Labor force participation* is a measure of the percentage of women in the county, aged 16 years or older, who are members of the civilian labor force. Included are both the percentage of women who work at least 15 hours per week outside the home, and those who had looked for work in the month preceding the census. Conversely, (1-X) can be interpreted as an approximate measure of the percentage of women in the county who are full-time homemakers. Finally, a measure of *fertility* is also included, defined as the average number of children per number of married women in the county aged 35-44.<sup>31</sup>

The dependent variable is the ratio of female to male arrests in each county in 1972. The 1972 data were selected for use because of their availability, completeness, and proximity to the 1970 census. Because this study looks at variations in social position and the *ratio* of female to male arrests, rather than absolute frequencies, any demonstrated patterns should also be found in more recent years. The data were made available for this study by the Michigan State Police.

As is well known, the use of official arrest statistics necessarily raises questions concerning the specification of exactly what arrest data measure.<sup>32-34</sup> At best, arrest statistics are a crude measure of criminal activity; they include only crimes detected and reported, and offenders identified, found, and arrested. Each stage of this process allows discretion by the police and the public in their formal and informal reactions to crime. Therefore, arrest statistics measure behavior by criminals, the public, and the police, including any differences in the latter's willingness to suspect and arrest women. In turn, this willingness can be seen as a function of several factors, one of which might be actual rates of female criminality. This point will be elaborated below.

## Findings

### A. *Variations in the Sex Ratio of Arrests*

Table 1 presents the distribution of the sex ratio of arrests, ordered from the crime for which arrests are most frequently female (prostitution), to the crime having the smallest proportion of female arrests (rape). Overall, the total ratio of female to male arrests is .192, ranging from .02 to .254 over the 83 counties. In can be seen in Table 1 that

TABLE 1  
FEMALE ARRESTS BY TYPE OF CRIME

Crime	Number of females arrested	Ratio of female to male arrests
1. Prostitution	2,561	1.97
2. Runaway	10,237	1.52
3. Larceny	13,765	.484
4. Manslaughter	59	.391
5. Forgery/Counterfeiting	596	.339
6. Fraud	977	.268
7. Embezzlement	81	.226
8. Curfew and Loitering	929	.225
9. Non-aggravated Assault	2,208	.215
10. Murder	117	.196
11. Gambling	123	.190
12. Disorderly Conduct	2,753	.181
13. Vagrancy	143	.175
14. Liquor	1,506	.169
15. Narcotics and Drugs	4,695	.161
16. Arson	103	.158
17. "Other"	8,255	.138
18. Aggravated Assault	718	.134
19. Family/Children	490	.115
20. Vandalism	767	.103
21. Weapons	634	.094
22. Stolen Property	374	.081
23. Drunkenness	2,580	.074
24. Auto Theft	300	.072
25. Driving Under Influence of Liquor	2,195	.064
26. Sex Offenses	79	.045
27. Burglary	814	.041
28. Robbery	280	.037
29. Rape	10	.012
Total	58,349	.192

many of the crimes for which a large proportion of arrests involve women are offenses which allow a great deal of discretion in their reporting and enforcement. Two forms of criminal behavior with a relatively high proportion of female arrests, runaway and curfew/loitering, are juvenile offenses. Because this behavior deviates more radically from female role expectations than male role expectations, it would be expected that given identical behavior, girls would be more likely than boys to be arrested.<sup>6,7</sup> By far, the predominant major crime for which women have a high proportion of arrests is larceny.

Table 2 presents the zero order correlations between the major variables under investigation. Each of the relationships with the sex ratio of arrests is significant above the .01 level, thus supporting the hypotheses. The ratio of female to male arrests increases directly with urbanity and the social position of women in the area, and is inversely related to the average number of children.

Because the data in Table 2 indicate a relatively high intercorrelation among the independent variables, regression analysis can be used to ascertain the net ability of each of the independent variables to explain the variation in the sex ratio of arrests. The equation reveals that the five independent variables, when regressed on the sex ratio of arrests, produce an  $R^2$  of .495 (Multiple  $R = .703$ ). Urbanity alone explains .379 of the variation, adding labor force participation increases  $R^2$  to .477, and median education, median income, and the average number of children explain the additional .018 of the variation. Net of urbanity, the social position of women increases the amount of explained variation by 11.6 percent. Taken together, approximately half of the variation in the sex ratio of arrests can be explained by these independent variables.

TABLE 2  
ZERO-ORDER CORRELATIONS

	Urbanity	Median Income	Median Education	Labor Force Partici- pation	Average Number of Children	Female/ Male Arrests	Traditional/ Nontradi- tional Female Arrests
	1.000	.322	.421	.334	-.292	.616	.391
		1.000	.333	.546	-.316	.357	.313
			1.000	.553	-.219	.500	.409
				1.000	-.272	.501	.361
					1.000	-.255	-.269
						1.000	.658
							1.000
Mean	32.76	\$3,183	11.92	36.92	3.57	.1318	.6283
Standard Deviation	27.33	\$691.3	.48	5.17	.45	.0531	.405

Table 3 summarizes this regression, and lends itself to the following interpretation. The zero order correlation between urbanity and the sex ratio of arrests is .616. The beta coefficient from Table 3 indicates that

.455 of this .616, or 74 percent, is due to the direct effects of urbanity, with the remaining 26 percent due to the intercorrelation of urbanity and the other independent variables. The percent of females in the labor force also exerts a significant independent effect on the sex ratio of arrests, with 49 percent (.245/.501) of its effect acting directly. After controlling for urbanity and the percent of women in the labor force, the remaining independent variables do not significantly increase the predictive power of the equation. In sum, the ratio of female to male arrests increases directly with urbanity and the labor force participation of women. Both predictors have a statistically significant unique explanatory impact.

TABLE 3  
RESULTS FROM REGRESSION OF THE SEX RATIO OF ARRESTS  
ON INDICATORS OF SOCIAL POSITION AND URBANITY<sup>1</sup>

Independent Variables	b (Standard Error)	Beta
Urbanity	.00088 (.00018)	.455**
Labor Force Participation	.00251 (.00113)	.245*
Median Education	.01824 (.01136)	.164
Median Income <sup>2</sup>	.00133 (.01)	.017
Average Number of Children	-.00167 (.01034)	-.014
Constant	-.20575	

<sup>1</sup>Multiple R = .703; R<sup>2</sup> = .495

<sup>2</sup>In Thousands of Dollars

\*Regression coefficient is twice its standard error ( $p < .05$ )

\*\*Regression coefficient is three times its standard error ( $p < .001$ )

A similar model was also estimated after omitting the females arrested for prostitution, runaway, or curfew/loitering. This procedure allows us to ascertain if the above relationships result simply from differential involvement in prostitution and juvenile offenses. However, the analysis produced an R<sup>2</sup> of .499, with both urbanity and labor force participation exerting significant predictive effects. Thus, the ability of urbanity and labor force participation to explain the variation in the sex ratio of arrests is not significantly affected by the elimination of juvenile offenses and prostitution from the arrest figures.

#### B. "Traditional" vs. "Non-Traditional" Female Crime

A final test was undertaken to determine if the types of crimes for which women are most often arrested in areas where their collective social position is relatively higher are qualitatively different than those crimes for which they are arrested where their aggregate social position is relatively lower. This test is particularly relevant to the hypothesis that differences in the social position of women are related to variations in the predominant types of female criminality.<sup>26,27</sup> To test this

hypothesis, a ratio of the number of arrests of women for "traditional" female crimes divided by the number of females arrested for all other crimes was constructed for each county and regressed on the five independent variables. Prostitution, runaway, and larceny — those crimes from Table 1 for which arrests are most often female — were used to construct the numerator of this index. If the crimes for which females are arrested are indeed qualitatively different, and less "traditional" in areas where women have attained a relatively higher social position, then it would be expected that this ratio will decrease as the social position of women increases. However, as demonstrated by the positive zero order correlations reported in Table 2, Adler's position is not supported. When this ratio is regressed on the five independent variables, as summarized in Table 4, 26 percent of the variation is explained (Multiple R = .511). If urbanity is removed from the model, still 23 percent of the variation can be explained solely by using the indicators of social position. Therefore, there is no evidence to support the claim that qualitative changes in female criminality are associated with variations in the social position of women. Where women have achieved a relatively higher aggregate social position, more are arrested for traditional offenses, and no decline in arrests of females for traditional crimes relative to female arrests for other crimes is evident. Consequently, there appears to be no support for the notion that "feminism" causes or is associated with a new type of female criminal, or that female criminality represents, as Adler calls it, "the shady side of liberation."<sup>27</sup> (p. 42) In fact, since the ratio of arrests of women for traditional crimes relative to female arrests for other crimes is positively associated with increases in the social position of women, then increases in social position actually *augment* the distinctions between the "traditional" and the "new" female offender. Gender differences in the types of offenders arrested do not decrease: they become more pronounced.

TABLE 4  
RESULTS FROM REGRESSION OF RATIO OF TRADITIONAL TO NON-TRADITIONAL  
FEMALE ARRESTS ON INDICATORS OF SOCIAL POSITION AND URBANITY<sup>1</sup>

Independent Variables	b (Standard Error)	Beta
Urbanity	.0031 (.002)	.208
Labor Force Participation	.0074 (.011)	.094
Median Education	.1841 (.105)	.217
Median Income <sup>2</sup>	.0519 (.07)	.089
Average Number of Children	-.097 (.096)	-.108
Constant	-1.76	

<sup>1</sup>Multiple R = .511; R<sup>2</sup> = .261

<sup>2</sup>In Thousands of Dollars



## Discussion

The above data demonstrate that variations in the ratio of female to male arrests can be substantially explained by considering urbanity and the labor force participation of women. However, the multitude of factors which affect arrest statistics prohibit their interpretation as equivalent to actual rates of criminality. Interpretation requires what Cressey has called a "sociology of crime reporting."<sup>35</sup> (p. xii) As Pollak has observed, equating arrest statistics with actual rates of criminality is inherently unreliable because criminal statistics attempt to measure behavior which is designed to escape observation and measurement.<sup>13</sup> (p. 150) Furthermore, possible differential treatment of the genders at various stages preceding an arrest<sup>6,13,28</sup> makes the use of arrest statistics to interpret relative male and female criminality even more problematic than within-gender comparisons. Hence, it is not clear to what extent these findings reflect differences in police behavior or in actual patterns of criminality.

The first factor which may explain the observed differences in the sex ratio of arrests is variations in patterns of police discretion. The community's expectations and stereotypes concerning women will affect both the public's crime reporting and subsequent police reactions. The tendency for victims of female offenders to report the crimes less often than victims of male offenders,<sup>36</sup> as well as the possible tendency of police to be "chivalrous" and not arrest women as quickly as men in areas where the aggregate behavior of women is more traditional,<sup>6,7</sup> might be less pronounced in areas where traditional sex role stereotypes are less valid. Sex roles expectations can become institutionalized in the organizational policies of large police departments, where formal training programs and procedures might direct officers to look at both genders with equal impersonality and suspicion, and to label all groups in the population as potential lawbreakers. A more vigilant police attitude and less hesitancy to call the police to report crimes by women will be reflected in the sex ratio of arrest statistics. In sum, the amount of crime found is a function of where and how carefully the public and the police look for it.

A second factor affecting variations in the sex ratio of arrests might be actual differences in the relative frequency of criminal behavior by the genders. By definition, differences in a group's role expectations and sex role stereotypes will coincide with variations in behavioral opportunities. In urban areas and where more women have joined the labor force, there are more opportunities and pressures for a wide range of behaviors, including some labeled criminal. Simon has applied this point to historical data to explain recent increases in the frequency of women arrested for larceny, fraud, and embezzlement.<sup>19</sup> Just as important as the availability of opportunities, however, is the realization of the *lack* of legitimate opportunities for and by women. This lack of

legitimate opportunities will become increasingly evident in areas where women assume greater financial responsibilities and attempt to break away from traditional role constraints by working outside the home. Thus, insofar as variations in the sex ratio of arrests reflect actual differences in patterns of criminal behavior by the genders, the higher ratios must be seen not only as a function of increased opportunities, but frustrated aspirations and blocked opportunities as well.

The data do not support the hypothesis that in areas where the social position of women is higher, a larger proportion of female arrests are for crimes that have traditionally been male dominated. Such a perspective has been used to attribute the recent historical rise in the sex ratio of arrests to the reemergence of the women's movement,<sup>26</sup> viewing the higher sex ratio as "the social costs of social improvement."<sup>37</sup> This finding is consistent with individual level of analysis of female offenders that indicate they are not liberated, politicalized, upwardly mobile, or from higher social positions.<sup>38,39</sup> Thus, the higher sex ratio of arrests in urban areas and where more women have joined the labor force cannot be explained by the idea that liberated women are increasing their participation in both legal and illegal behaviors usually dominated by men.

The idea that the women's movement is associated with new patterns of female criminality suffers further from its assumption that variations in the social position of women are the result of an organized emancipatory movement. Women work outside the home because of economic needs,<sup>40</sup> not because of liberated attitudes. Although increases in the sex ratio of arrests are associated with a larger percentage of women in the labor force, this does not necessarily indicate that in these areas women are involved in higher status, traditionally male dominated occupations. In fact, the median income of women presented in Table 2 (\$3,183.00) suggests that in areas where a larger proportion of women work outside the home, they are probably concentrated in lower status positions. Other women in these areas, subject to similar economic pressures and tensions, might engage in illegal behaviors. Hence, if the women's movement is not a cause of greater labor force participation by women, neither can it be seen as the cause of the higher sex ratio of arrests.

## **Conclusion**

The data presented in this paper show that half of the geographic variation in the sex ratio of arrests can be explained by focusing on cultural, social, and law enforcement factors which fluctuate with urbanity and the social position of women. In urban areas and where a larger proportion of women have joined the labor force, the ratio of female to male arrests is higher than in rural areas and where a larger proportion of women are fulltime homemakers. This higher sex ratio of arrests is primarily a function of a higher arrest rate of women for

traditional female crimes (*i.e.*, larceny, prostitution, runaway), and not of more arrests of women for crimes which have been dominated in most areas by males. The higher proportion of female arrests is interpreted as a function of the community's expectations concerning women and procedural differences in police practices, not necessarily as a result of higher rates of actual criminality or smaller differences between male and female patterns of crime. A more focused study of how police perceptions and attitudes toward women vary with urbanity and female labor force participation is an important next step in increasing our understanding of variations in the sex ratio of arrests.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Marshall B. Clinard, John C. Henretta, Ronald Kessler, and Robert Perrucci for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. The research was supported in part by Grant MH 14641 from the National Institute of Mental Health.

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