

The Gender Gap in Violent Victimization, 1973–2004

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Abstract In this paper, data from the NCS and NCVS are developed for the purpose of describing long-term trends in male and female violent victimization for the period 1973–2004. More specifically, gender-specific trends in violence are compared according to crime type and victim–offender relationship. Despite their potential usefulness, these data have not been published previously. The data reveal that the gender gap in robbery victimization has remained relatively stable while the gender gaps in aggravated and simple assault victimization have narrowed over time. Results varied when the data were disaggregated by victim–offender relationship. Male and female rates of nonstranger simple assault and nonstranger robbery were roughly equivalent throughout the period, and the greater risk for male nonstranger aggravated assault that was evident three decades ago has largely disappeared. The gender gap persists in stranger assault, but has narrowed somewhat because male rates of victimization have declined more than female rates. In addition, male and female trends and the gender gap in nonlethal intimate partner violence differ from the patterns established in intimate partner homicide studies. The paper concludes with a discussion of research that is needed to understand why the gender gap in violent victimization has changed for some types of violence but not others, and how greater attention to gender will improve efforts to understand crime trends.

Keywords Gender · Victimization · Trends · Violence

Introduction

In its recent review of research on the topic of violence against women, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) noted that the lack of valid and reliable long-term indicators

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of violence against women has been a critical problem hindering our understanding about trends in violence (Kruttschnitt et al. 2004). As a result, we do not know whether the changes in crime over the past several decades have affected women and men equally. The report states: “If we are to advance the state of knowledge on violence against women, there can be no higher priority than improving data on prevalence and incidence” (Kruttschnitt et al. 2004, p. 98). The report further argues that our understanding of violence against women will benefit from the study of additional forms of violence beyond acts committed by intimate partners and from greater integration with the broader literature on the causes of violence (Kruttschnitt et al. 2004, p. 2).

In this paper, we address some of the important empirical challenges raised in the NAS report by using data from more than thirty years of the National Crime Surveys (NCS) and National Crime Victimization Surveys (NCVS) to develop reliable estimates of long-term trends in violence against women and men. The victimization estimates are disaggregated by type of violent crime and victim–offender relationship to provide the first detailed description of how nonlethal violent victimization among women and men has changed over the past three decades. Supplementary Homicide Report (SHR) data are also examined to compare gender-specific trends in lethal and nonlethal violence. We describe long-term trends in male and female violent victimization in order to respond to some of the challenges set forth in the NAS report and demonstrate the benefits of a comparative approach to the study of violence against women. We also show how analyses of the recent crime decline in the United States might profit from an explicit consideration of the changing significance of gender and violent victimization.

Prior Research

Several bodies of literature are relevant to an assessment of trends in the gender gap in violent victimization including studies of gender and offending, violence against women, and victimization more generally. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review all of the relevant findings, therefore we highlight some of the key insights from that work that focus our discussion of trends. These include prior discussions about the gender gap in offending, findings about the gender gap in homicide and intimate partner homicide, the importance of disaggregating violence rates by victim–offender relationship, and the challenges associated with the measurement of violence against women.

The vast majority of studies that have examined the gender gap in crime and violence have focused on describing and explaining gender differences in *offending* (see for example Kruttschnitt 1996; O’Brien 1999; Heimer 2000; Steffensmeier et al. 2005, 2006). Stimulated in part by ‘liberation’ hypotheses (Adler 1975; Simon 1975), past work has examined whether male and female rates of offending have narrowed over time as social roles have become more similar. The liberation hypothesis and other hypotheses, such as economic marginalization and the decay of chivalry, each predict that female rates of offending will rise over time and result in a closing of the gender gap.

Although developed to understand trends in female offending, such hypotheses are consistent with the logic underlying lifestyle and routine activities perspectives on victimization which share the assertion that the social patterning of daily life shapes an individual’s experience with crime (Cohen and Felson 1979; Hindelang et al. 1978). These victimization theories hypothesize that as males and females share increasingly similar daily routines and environments, their risks for violence will become more comparable. To date, most studies of gender and victimization risk have relied on cross-sectional analyses

and a variety of data sources, thus it is unknown whether the relationship has changed over time or might be influenced by changes in broader social conditions. An early study of gender-specific trends in victimization was conducted by Smith (1987) who examined patterns in the 1973–1982 NCS. He reported some increases in the proportion of robbery victimizations experienced by females, but few changes in female assault victimization. Notwithstanding this early study, and the overlapping predictions of lifestyle/routine activities theories and other hypotheses about the gender gap in offending, the only studies to offer comparisons of long-term trends in male and female violent victimization have been devoted to homicide (Browne and Williams 1993; Smith and Brewer 1995; Dugan et al. 1999, 2003; Rosenfeld 2000; Batton 2004; LaFree and Hunnicutt 2006).

Studies of gender-specific homicide trends in the U.S. have found that offenders and victims are disproportionately male, that the gap in victimization is smaller than the gap in offending, and that homicide rates among both males and females declined during the 1990s (see for example Rosenfeld 2000). When male and female homicide victimization trends have been compared, they are often interpreted within a gender equality framework (Bailey and Peterson 1995; LaFree and Hunnicutt 2006). This framework views violence against women as the result of patriarchal control and hypothesizes that such violence will decrease as inequalities between men and women decrease (LaFree and Hunnicutt 2006, p. 197). According to this argument, any changes in the gender gap that are associated with changes in inequality will be driven by declining rates of female victimization. Contrary to this, LaFree and Hunnicutt's (2006) cross-national study found that the gender gap narrowed primarily because of a decline in *male* victimization rates.

One plausible interpretation, consistent with LaFree and Hunnicutt's results, is that as gender equality has increased and women have increasingly moved from the private sphere of the home into the public sphere, including the labor market (Walby 1990), their presence has exerted a "civilizing influence" in the public sphere (Elias 1978).¹ In effect, demonstrations of violence in public may have become less acceptable over time because women have acted as capable guardians. Under this scenario, we would expect male victimization, which is typically outside of the home, to decline because these incidents are dominated by male offenders. At the same time, female victimization outside of the home might be expected to rise as women increase their exposure to male offenders. This prediction about the effects of decreasing gender inequality on the gender gap in victimization is consistent with the logic of lifestyle and routine activities theories.

Other findings from homicide research indicate that conclusions about the gender gap in victimization are contingent on whether the data are disaggregated by victim-offender relationship (Browne and Williams 1993; Rosenfeld 2000). For example, using city-level data, Dugan et al. (1999, 2003) found declines in male and female intimate partner homicide rates over the past twenty-five years, and evidence that such trends were related to falling marriage rates. But the declines were greater for males than females and both "exposure reduction" and "retaliation" processes appeared to account for the differences across the trends. Dugan et al.'s findings suggest that males appear to have benefited more

¹ In his historical tome, Elias does not discuss in detail how gender norms affect the civilizing process. He does, however, note that changes in gender relationships might be expected to do so when "the dominance of the husband over the wife is broken for the first time" (1978, p. 151). He states: "Social opinion is determined to a high degree by women....It remains to be shown in more detail how decisive this...first wave of emancipation of women...was for the civilizing process, for the advance of the frontier of shame and embarrassment and for the strengthening of social control over the individual. Just as the increased power changes, the social ascent of the other social groups necessitated new forms of drive control for all at a level midway between those previously imposed on the rulers and the ruled respectively" (1978, p. 151).

from the availability of domestic violence services in that such resources may have made it possible for women to leave abusive partners rather than kill them in self-defense during violent episodes. The different findings about the gender gap in intimate partner homicide versus the gap in homicide overall demonstrates the importance of disaggregating nonlethal victimization rates by victim–offender relationship. Indeed, one of the most prominent themes in the research on violence against women is the need to investigate the gendered nature of relationships in order to understand how violence operates in the lives of women and girls.

Assessments of long-term changes in the gender gap in violent victimization do not exist for types of violence other than homicide, and it is not clear whether the findings from homicide studies can be generalized to more prevalent forms of violence. Consequently, we do not know whether long-term trends in crime have affected males and females equally. The general lack of integration between studies of violence against women and broader research on crime and violence has contributed to the lack of knowledge about this basic question, but so too have empirical challenges associated with finding measures of violent victimization that are reasonably reliable and valid and comparable over time (Kruttschnitt et al. 2004). It is well-known that police data are problematic for this purpose because much violence—especially violence against women—is poorly measured by police data (see for example Gartner and Macmillan 1995; Kruttschnitt 1996). Rape and sexual assaults, and nonstranger and intimate partner incidents against women are often least likely to be reported to the police (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000; Catalano 2005). Of course, even if reporting rates were higher, police data would be of limited use because for crimes other than homicide, the data lack information about the sex of the victim.²

According to the NAS report (Kruttschnitt et al. 2004), much can be learned about trends in violence against women from extant data. Although the NCS and NCVS are mentioned as potential sources of information, they have not been used to describe long-term trends primarily “because the content of assault and sexual assault items was changed” (2005, p. 37).³ As most criminologists are aware, the NCS and NCVS have been used to gather self-report data about persons’ experiences with violence and other forms of victimization continuously since 1973, and in 1992, the NCS questionnaire was redesigned and henceforth became known as the NCVS. Key reasons for the changes in the survey were the difficulties of obtaining estimates of events that were not commonly thought of as “crimes” and discoveries about the extent of family, intimate partner, and sexual violence from other surveys about violence against women (Kindermann et al. 1997). The introduction of new cues and prompts in the redesigned NCVS instrument resulted in significantly higher rates of rape and other types of crime, as well as higher levels of nonstranger crimes and incidents not reported to the police. It is possible to use the NCS and NCVS together to study victimization rates from 1973 to the present by taking into account the break in the series and weighting the data in ways that are informed by research on the effects of methodological and content changes to the survey. Although the NCS and NCVS data have been used to estimate long-term trends for certain types of crime (Rand et al. 1997) and for offending among selected subgroups such as adolescents (Lynch 2002), they have not yet been used to study long-term gender-specific trends in violent victimization.

² Increases in the use of the NIBRS reporting system will eliminate one aspect of this problem, but obviously preclude trend analyses for some time.

³ NCVS data have been used to describe trends in violence against women since 1992 (Greenfield et al. 1998; Rennison 2003; Lauritsen and Rennison 2006).

In this paper, we develop annual estimates of violent victimization by gender for the period 1973–2004 and describe how changes in victimization over time have affected males and females. More specifically, we compare male and female national trends in robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault victimization, as well as these same crimes disaggregated by whether the offender was a stranger or nonstranger to the victim. Of course, rape should be included in any assessment of women’s risk for violence. However, because rape is predominantly experienced by females, the measure cannot be reliably disaggregated to study gender-specific trends.⁴ To incorporate this form of violence into our study, we also estimate a total nonlethal violence rate for males and females that includes rape. Because the total nonlethal violence rate is based on a sufficiently large number of events, this measure also permits us to estimate and compare male and female trends in intimate partner violence. In addition, we compare gender-specific trends in nonlethal violence to those for homicide. This descriptive effort allows us to assess whether the gender gaps for various forms of violent victimization have changed over time, and to note whether changes are likely to have been driven by female or male trends, or a combination of both patterns. The overarching goal of our study is to describe male and female patterns in violent victimization over the past three decades.

Data

To create gender specific rates of violence over time, we compile data from the NCS and the NCVS for the period 1973–2004.⁵ Due to the nature of the sample, these rates are estimated per 1,000 males and females ages twelve and over. The only changes to the methodology that affected violent victimization rates were those associated with the NCS-NCVS transition in 1992. Because this was anticipated and planned for, the changes to the instrument were phased into the data collection process, and for an 18-month period, both surveys were being administered simultaneously. Thus, any observed differences between the rates obtained from the two surveys can be attributed to instrumentation rather than to any temporal changes in violence that had occurred.

In addition, the phase-in design made it possible to assess the effects of the new format across different subgroups of the population. Prior analyses of data from the phase-in period showed that the NCVS questionnaire significantly increased the reporting of victimization and that the magnitude of the change varied according to crime type (Lynch and Cantor 1996; Kindermann et al. 1997; Rand et al. 1997). Rape reporting by women increased the most, followed by aggravated assault and simple assault.⁶ Robbery victimization rates were not significantly higher in the NCVS compared to the NCS.

⁴ Levels of male rape and sexual assault victimization in the NCS and NCVS are too low to be used reliably for such comparisons.

⁵ These files are archived under several study numbers: (1) Study# 7635, National Crime Survey, National Sample, 1973–1983; (2) Study# 8608, National Crime Survey, National Sample, 1979–1987; (3) Study# 8864, National Crime Survey, National Sample, 1986–1992; and (4) Study# 4276, National Crime Victimization Survey, 1992–2004.

⁶ Although many of the changes to the instrument involved the addition of cues and prompts for events that subjects may not have thought were crimes (e.g., nonstranger events, incidents not reported to the police), the questions regarding rape and sexual violence changed most. In particular, the new questions ask directly about “rape, attempted rape or other type of sexual attack” and additional prompts are used to elicit incidents involving “forced or unwanted sexual acts.” Thus, the definition of sexual violence (rape and sexual assault) is more specific and broader in the NCVS period. To maintain what we believe is a greater degree of comparability in definition over time, we use “rape” but not “sexual assault” estimates from the NCVS in our summary measure of nonlethal violence.

Lynch (2002) details the appropriate procedures for estimating long-term offending trends using the NCS and NCVS. We follow these procedures to generate gender-specific estimates of violent victimization for the period 1973–2004. Rate of victimization are created from each survey for the overlap period, and if the NCVS/NCS ratio of the rate estimates are found to be statistically significant, then that ratio can be applied to the NCS estimates to make them comparable to NCVS estimates.

For some crime types, small gender differences were associated with the new design. For example, male reporting of simple assault increased by a factor of 2.0 using the new instrument, while female reporting of simple assault increased by a factor of 1.7. However, the differences between these ratios were not found to be statistically significant (Kindermann et al. 1997). Nonetheless, to check how such differences might influence our descriptions of trends and changes in the gender gap, we also examined the trends using weights that took into account crime type and gender. Generally speaking, these adjustments made the gender gap appear slightly *larger* during the NCS time period and the use of additional weights would bias our descriptions of the gender gap trends toward the conclusion that gender differences were greater in the past than now. Because of this and the fact the gender differences were not statistically significant, the final weights for the victimization estimates in the NCS period consist of the same crime-specific ratios developed in earlier analyses of the design change and used by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Lynch and Cantor 1996; Kindermann et al. 1997; Rand et al. 1997). Accordingly, victimization estimates for the 1973–1991 NCS period were multiplied by w_c , where $w_c = 2.57$ for rape, 1.00 for robbery, 1.23 for aggravated assault, and 1.75 for simple assault.

We also compare male and female victimization rates disaggregated by the relationship between the victim and the offender. To this end, we estimate rates of stranger, nonstranger, and intimate partner violence committed against females and males. Stranger incidents include those in which the victim reported that the offender was unknown to the victim, nonstranger incidents include those in which the victim reported some relationship other than that of a stranger, and intimate partner incidents included those reported to have been committed by spouses, ex-spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends, ex-boyfriends, and ex-girlfriends. For descriptions of intimate partner violence, rape, robbery, aggravated assault and simple assault incidents are combined to create a measure of violence that allows us to produce more reliable estimates of the trends.^{7,8} Rape is clearly an important part of violence against women, and as noted above, we include rape in a composite measure of violent victimization.

For comparative purposes, we also use data from the Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR). Annual homicide rates for 1976–2003 were calculated using the weighted number of homicides from the SHR (Fox 2005) divided by population totals for males and females

⁷ Incidents in which the victim was unable to provide information on the victim–offender relationship are necessarily excluded from these trends. Victimization estimates are based on all (multiple and single offender) incidents, and in multiple offender incidents, the relationship is coded nonstranger if at least one offender is reported to be a nonstranger. Multiple offender incidents involving intimate partners are treated similarly, although intimate partner violence rarely includes multiple offenders.

⁸ For assessments of intimate partner violence we use data from 1979–2004. In earlier years of the NCS, the offender categories of boyfriend, ex-boyfriend, girlfriend, and ex-girlfriend were not designated and thus incidents of violence involving these victim–offender relationships would not have been counted as intimate partner violence. By restricting our analyses of intimate partner violence to these years, we retain a consistent definition of intimate partner over time.

from the Census.⁹ Homicide rates (per 100,000) for total, stranger, nonstranger, intimate partner, and relationship-unknown incidents were calculated for males and females.

Of course, no data are without limitations and the NCS and NCVS data are no exception. For our purposes, the key strength of the data is its most obvious feature: these are the only available source of continuous information about violent victimization. Aside from the redesign, there have not been major methodological changes to the instrument that could be confounded with observed changes in violence rates. Other strengths include large annual sample sizes, broad sample coverage, and high response rates (see for example Rennison and Rand 2006). In addition, NCVS estimates of violence against women have been shown to be externally valid when compared to estimates from the 1995 National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS). Rand and Rennison (2005) found that although the 1995 NCVS estimate of rape was lower than that found in the NVAWS, the difference between the two estimates was not statistically significant. They also found the assault rate to be slightly higher in the NCVS. Despite important differences in sampling method and the use of alternative questions, cues, and prompts, these two surveys produced similar annual victimization rates for violence against women providing evidence that the NCVS data have good external validity.

The use of weights to adjust NCS data to make them comparable to NCVS data has its own limitations. In particular, the use of these weights assumes that the effect of the methodological change is constant across the NCS years—i.e., that the effect of the new instrument would have been the same had it been phased in at an earlier time point. Although it cannot be determined whether this is true, Rand et al. (1997) and others (Lynch 2002) argue that it is probably the case that any potential weighting error is correlated with time and that estimates for distant years may be more problematic than those for years closer to the redesign. They also note that the weights for statistically rare crimes such as rape are the least robust because they are based on relatively fewer incidents reported during the eighteen month phase-in period. Therefore, some caution must be used in drawing conclusions about these trends, especially if patterns are found to be driven by data from the earlier years of the NCS or from rarer forms of violence.

In addition, we do not include series victimizations in the trend estimates because of the difficulty in determining how many incidents are involved in such experiences (Planty 2006). Victimization of a similar nature that occur more than six times during a recall period and for which the victim cannot recall sufficient detail are referred to as series victimizations.¹⁰ In these instances, victims' estimates tend to be rounded approximations that can have substantial influences on overall estimates (Rand and Rennison 2005; Planty 2006). To reduce respondent burden, series victims are asked to report the details for the most recent event of the series. While male and female victimization rates would certainly be higher if series victimizations were included, we believe that the exclusion of these crimes is unlikely to bias our conclusions about the *trends* in the gender gap because preliminary analyses showed that the proportion of violent victimizations reported to be series incidents has declined slightly and in similar proportions for both males and females.¹¹

⁹ Because approximately 90% of all homicides reported in the UCR appear in the SHR, homicide counts in the SHR are weighted up to match the estimated national UCR totals (see Fox 2005). At the time of this writing, homicide counts by sex and victim-offender relationship were available through 2003.

¹⁰ During the NCS period, series victimizations were defined by three rather than six incidents.

¹¹ The proportion of violence incidents designated as series was examined for the period 1979–2004. These years match those for which there is a consistent definition of intimate partner violence. (See footnote 5.) For males, the average level of series victimization for the periods 1979–1987, 1987–1992, and 1992–2004 were 7.5%, 7.2%, and 5.2%. For females, the proportions for the same periods were 9.2%, 9.7%, and 6.2%.

Findings

Trends in the Violent Victimization of Females and Males by Crime Type

We begin by examining general trends in the violent victimization of females and males, and then proceed to disaggregate these trends by victim–offender relationships, including stranger, nonstranger, and intimate partner violence. Figures 1–4 show the patterns of female and male homicide, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault victimization rates, as well as the gender rate ratio of each form of victimization for the period 1973–2004. The gender rate ratio (the female victimization rate divided by male victimization rate) is displayed to describe the relative changes in female and male experiences with violence. In all figures, victimization rates appear on the left axis, and scales for the gender rate ratios appear on the right axis.

For comparative purposes, we begin with the crime of homicide. Gender differences in homicide trends have previously appeared in the literature and have constituted the primary source of information about long-term trends in violence against women. Figure 1 presents homicide data from the SHR and reveals the well-known peaks in male homicide victimization in the late 1970s and in the early 1990s. It also shows that female homicide victimization increased slightly during the late 1970s, then remained relatively stable until approximately 1994 when like male rates, they declined to roughly half of the rates of the early 1990s (from about 4 per 1000 to just over 2 per 1000). The gender ratio of homicide victimization hovers between about .27 and .33 from 1976 to 2004, and does not appear to change over time.¹² Thus, the female homicide rate has remained at roughly 30% of the male rate for the past three decades.

Using NCS-NCVS data, the findings about the gender gap in robbery victimization are somewhat similar. Figure 2 shows that robbery victimization has decreased over the past 30 years for both women and men. Male and female rates increased somewhat in the late 1980s, and male, but not female rates appear to have increased during the early 1990s. The male robbery trends are generally similar to the male homicide series, while the female robbery trends fluctuate a bit more than the female homicide trends. A close look at the robbery trends reveals that the proportional changes over time are not very different for women and men. Like Smith (1987) we find some increase in the ratio during the 1970s and 1980s, but a slight reversal in that trend thereafter. As a result, there was little overall change. In the early 1970s, the gender rate ratio was about 0.41: in 2004, it was 0.45. With few exceptions, female rates have remained about 40–50% of male rates over the past three decades.

By contrast, Fig. 3 suggests some narrowing of the gender gap in aggravated assault victimization rates. Male rates show a fairly steady decline throughout the 1970s and 1980s with a slight increase in the early 1990s. After the peak in 1993, the male rate declines dramatically by about 64% by 2004 (from 16.8 to 5.8 per 1000). By comparison, female rates *do not decline* in the 1970s and 1980s, but rather remain fairly stable until the early 1990s, when they increase some. As with males, this increase is followed by a subsequent decline of about 65% between 1993 and 2004 (from 8.2 to 2.8 per 1000). Although there was a dramatic percentage drop in aggravated assault during the mid- to late-1990s, the lack of decline in the female rates prior to the 1990s resulted in a relatively small difference in rates by the early years of the 21st century. The gender rate ratio was about 0.33 at in 1973 and had risen to approximately 0.55 to 0.65 by the early 2000s. This kind of shift

¹² These findings replicate those of LaFree and Hunnicutt for the United States for the period 1950–1999.

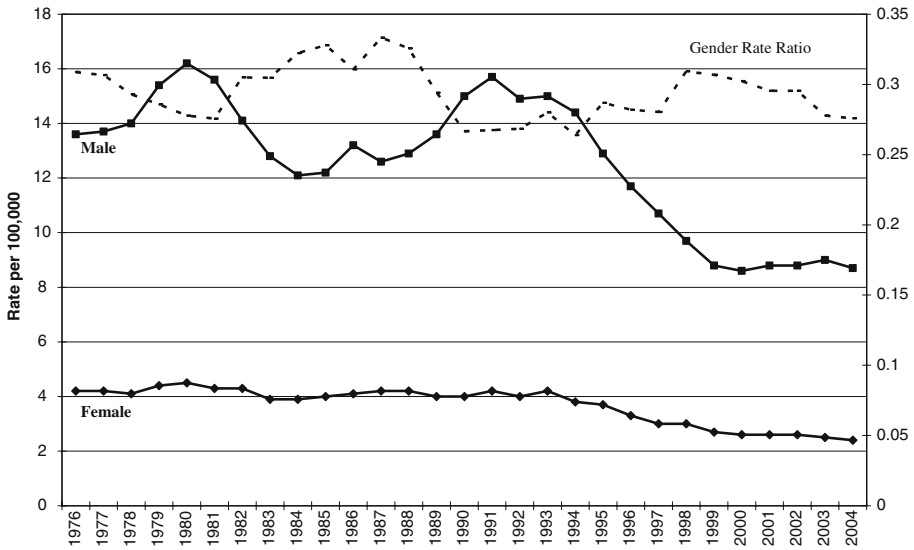


Fig. 1 Homicide victimization by gender: 1976–2004



Fig. 2 Robbery victimization by gender: 1973–2004

in gendered patterns of victimization emphasizes the need to consider female victimization in research on crime trends.

Figure 4 shows that rates of simple assault victimization are much higher than rates of aggravated assault victimization for both females and males. In addition, the gender rate ratio is higher for simple assault than for aggravated assault. Figure 4 indicates that, as with aggravated assault, male rates declined in the 1970s and 1980s while female rates did

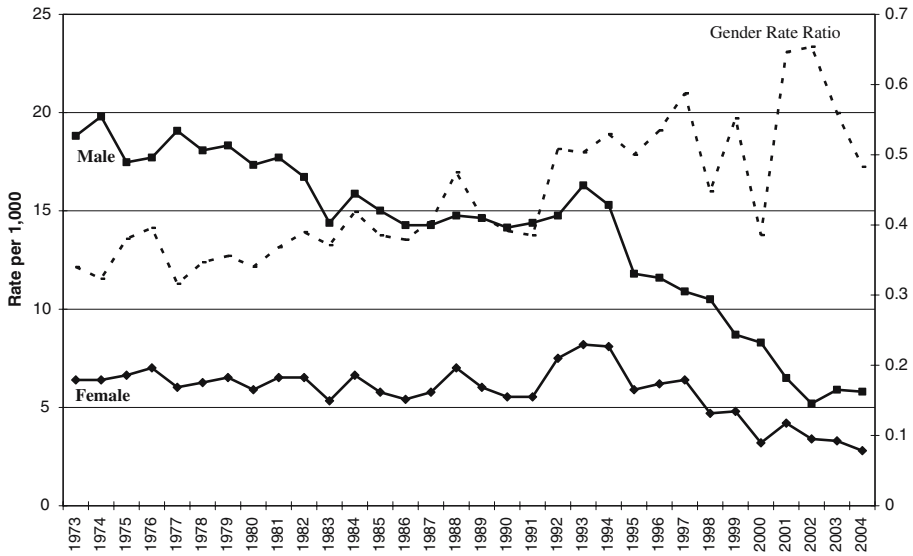


Fig. 3 Aggravated assault victimization by gender: 1973–2004

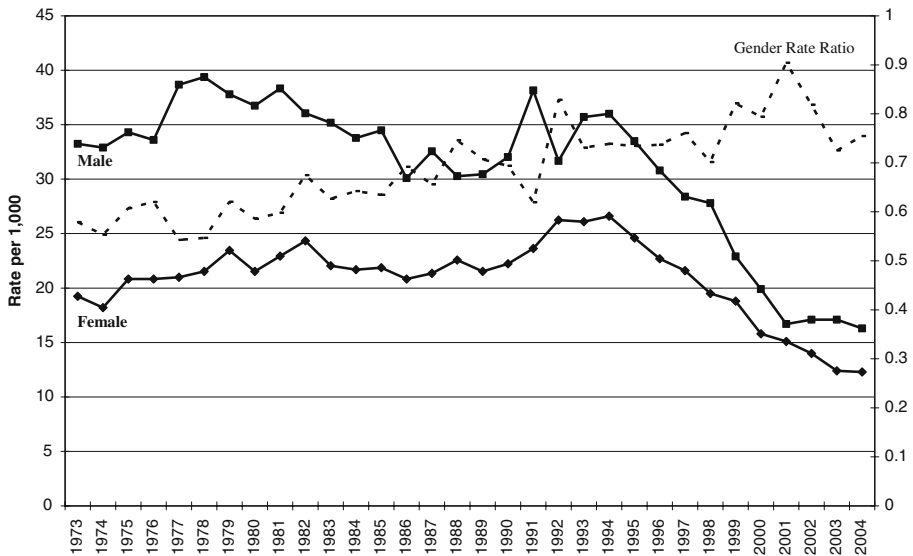


Fig. 4 Simple assault victimization by gender: 1973–2004

not decline and, indeed, seem to have increased somewhat. Both men and women experienced the familiar increase in the early 1990s, followed by a decline of about 54% among males and 52% among females by 2004. The result is that the gender ratio of simple assault victimization increased from about 0.58 in the early 1970s to about 0.74 in 2003 and 2004, with an even higher ratio in years 2000 and 2001. Like aggravated assault, the increase in the gender ratio for simple assault is primarily driven by declines in male victimization rates before the 1990s. Again, the fact that female assault victimization rates constituted

greater percentages of male rates by 2004 shows that violence against women should be treated by researchers as a critical component of violence in the United States.

Trends in Stranger and Nonstranger Male and Female Victimization by Crime Type

Thus far the sizable “crime drop” for homicide and robbery has been proportionately similar across gender and the gender ratios have not changed much over the past three decades. However, the declines in aggravated assault and simple assault have been proportionately greater among males than females primarily because of differences prior to the 1990s. It is possible that the different trends in the gender gap across crime types reflect differences in the nature of victim–offender relationships within each type of violence. The next set of findings describes gender-specific trends in stranger and nonstranger violent victimization according to crime type.

Figures 5 and 6 show that since 1976, homicide by strangers and nonstrangers has declined among females as well as males. The gender ratio of stranger homicide is 0.17 in both 1976 and 2002 (although it does decrease to about 0.14 in 2003) and fluctuates fairly substantially throughout the series (see Fig. 5). The gender ratio in nonstranger homicide—which is more common than stranger homicide for both males and females—hovers around 0.34 at the start of the series and increases to about 0.50 by the end of the series (see Fig. 6). This increase in the proportion of nonstranger homicides accounted for by female victims appears to have been most pronounced since the mid-1990s due to faster declines in the male versus female rates (46% and 31%, respectively) between 1994 and 2003.

However, it is difficult to be certain about trends in the gender gap for stranger and nonstranger homicide because of changes in the gender gap of homicides with unknown assailants (figure not shown). From 1976 to 1989, the female homicide rate with unknown assailants was consistently about 30% of the comparable male rate. By 2003, the female

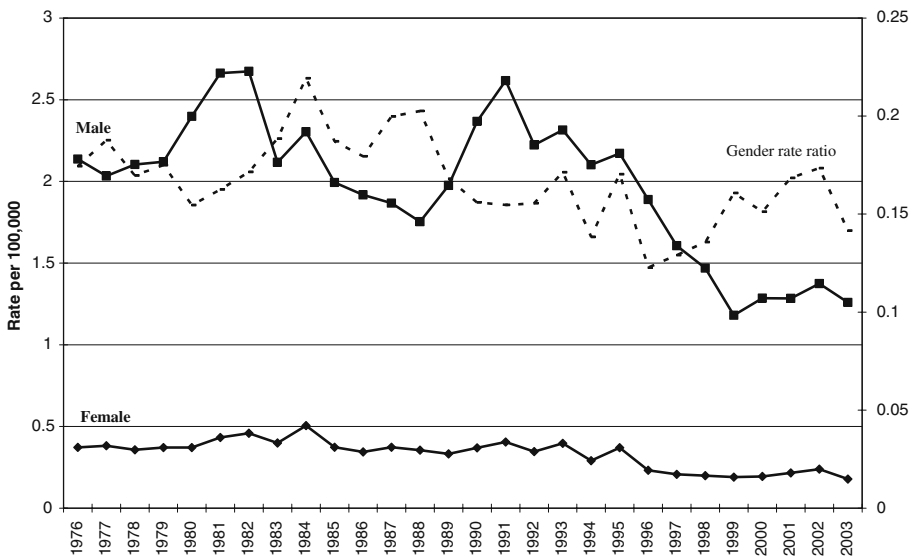


Fig. 5 Stranger homicide victimization by gender: 1976–2003

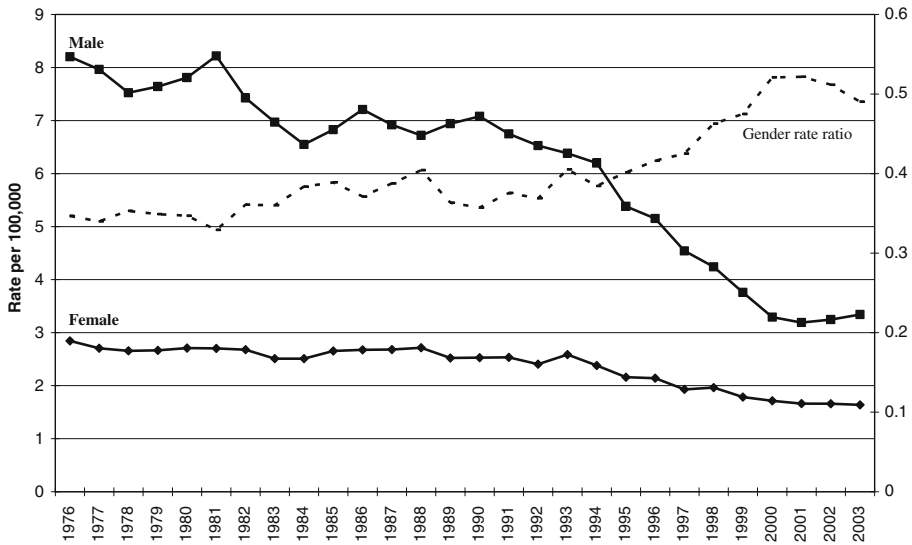


Fig. 6 Nonstranger homicide victimization by gender: 1976–2003

unknown assailant rate had dropped to about 16% of the male rate indicating that the decline in clearance rates has disproportionately affected homicides with male victims. Thus, although it is reasonable to draw conclusions about changes in the gender gap in overall homicide victimization, the growing lack of information about the victim–offender relationship in homicide data strongly suggest that caution be used when assessing changes in the gender gap according to victim–offender relationship (see for example Riedel and Regoeczi 2004).

Fortunately, the problem of missing offender information in nonlethal victimizations is not an issue with the survey data, and the measurement of victim–offender relationships changed little over the years of the NCS and NCVS (see footnote 6). Our disaggregation of victims' reports suggest that robbery remains dominated by offenders who are strangers to the victim, and Figs. 7, 8 show the difference in stranger and nonstranger robbery risk for males and females. Over the past three decades, female rates of stranger robbery victimization have been about one-third to one-half those of males. Figure 7 shows that there has been a long term decline in stranger robbery against males and females, with the rates declining about 79% and 73%, respectively. Figure 8 shows that nonstranger robbery is a rare event for both females and males. Thus, little trend and few differences are observed between male and female rates of this crime. The gender gap fluctuates widely from year to year because of the statistical rarity of these incidents and instability in the male and female rates.¹³

When aggravated assault victimizations are disaggregated into stranger and nonstranger incidents, it is evident that strangers are the perpetrators in the majority of aggravated assaults against males, whereas females are about equally likely to be assaulted by strangers and people they know (see Figs. 9, 10). In general, male and female rates of both stranger and nonstranger aggravated assault victimization declined over the past three

¹³ We are unaware of any research that explains why robbery, but no other violent crime, is so rarely committed against nonstrangers in the general population.

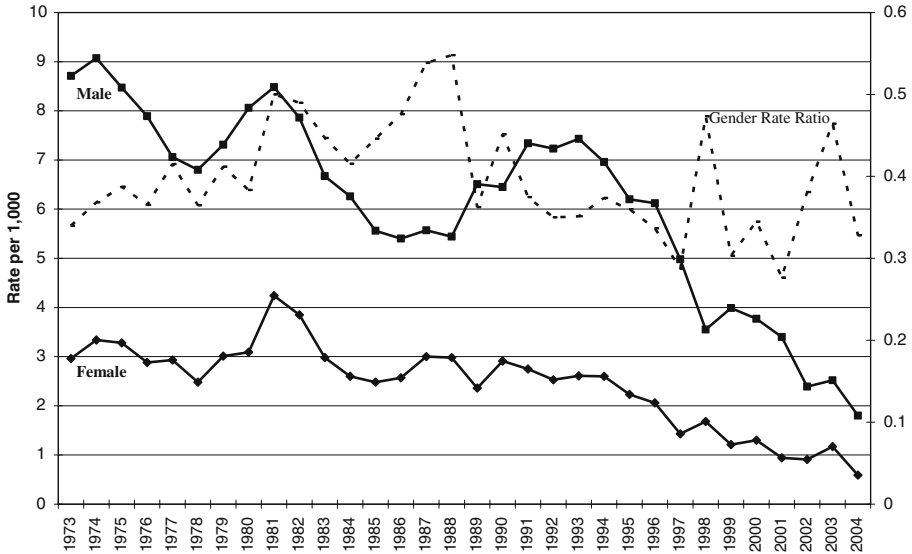


Fig. 7 Stranger robbery victimization by gender: 1973–2004

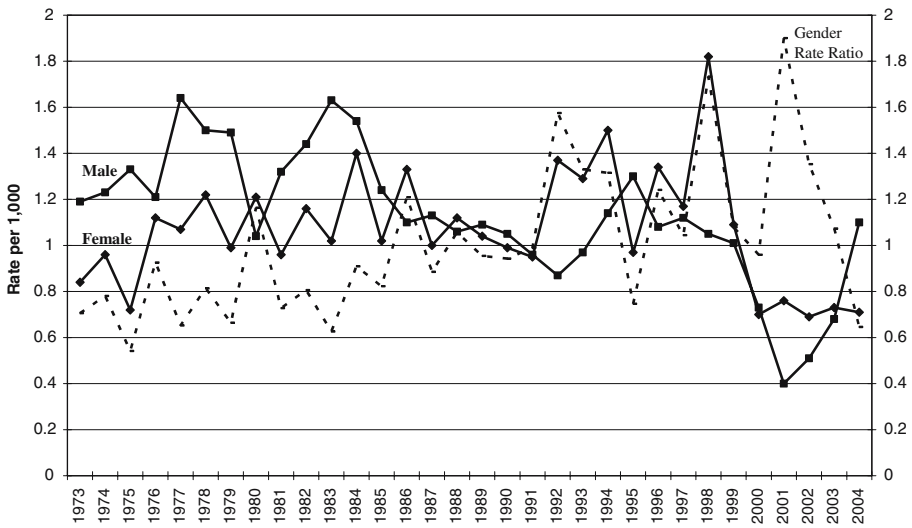


Fig. 8 Nonstranger robbery victimization by gender: 1973–2004

decades. Figure 9 shows that the rates of aggravated assaults by strangers have decreased more among males (77%) than females (62%) over the past three decades because unlike female rates, male rates of stranger aggravated assaults decreased some during the 1970s and 1980s (by about 21%). After 1993, both male and female rates dropped substantially, and at similar rates (71% and 72%, respectively). The gender rate ratio in stranger aggravated assault increased over time, from approximately 0.25 in the 1970s to about 0.37 since the late 1990s.

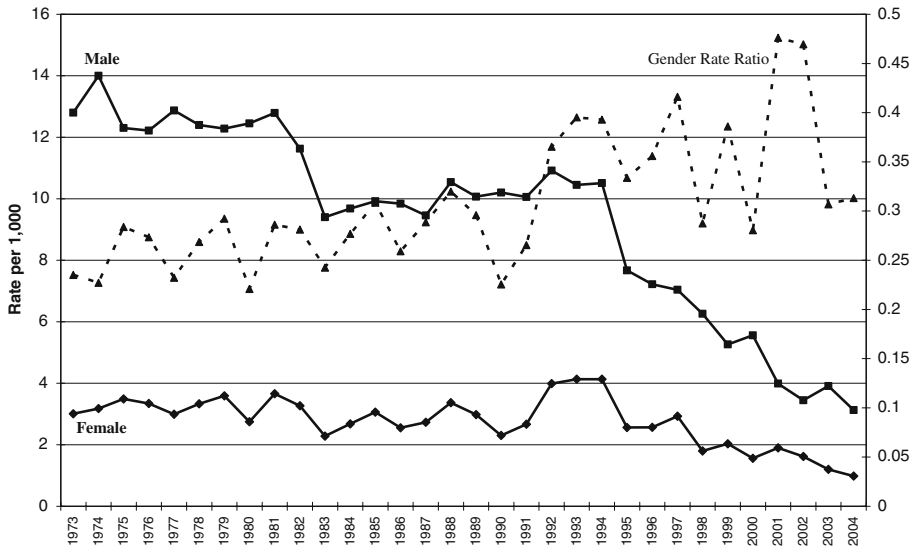


Fig. 9 Stranger aggravated assault victimization by gender: 1973–2004

Gender differences in the risk for nonstranger aggravated assault have been smaller than those for stranger aggravated assault throughout the series (compare Figs. 9 and 10). In fact, the nonstranger ratio has been about twice that for stranger incidents for the majority of years since the mid-1980s. The gender rate ratio in nonstranger aggravated assault increased from about 0.6 in the early years of the series to roughly 0.9 in more recent years. Similar to the findings for stranger aggravated assault, there appears to be some narrowing in the gender gap over time. Figure 10 indicates that rates of aggravated assault by nonstrangers have decreased more among males (57%) than females (42%) since 1973.

Our earlier description of simple assault indicated that there had been a narrowing of the gender gap in this form of victimization. When simple assault rates are disaggregated by victim–offender relationship, it is apparent that there has been a sizable gender gap in the risk for simple assault by strangers (see Fig. 11). An examination of the female and male rates of simple assaults by strangers shows that both rates decreased by roughly 60% from 1973 to 2004, and exhibit roughly parallel trends throughout the three decades. Thus, the gender ratio of simple assault by strangers does not show a clear trend over time. There is a fair amount of annual variability, but the gender rate ratios average about 0.41 in 1973–1975 and average about 0.48 in 2002–2004.

Nonstranger simple assault rates exhibit a different pattern—female rates were somewhat lower than male rates in the early 1970s, but have been somewhat higher for many of the years after 1983. Figure 12 shows that the rates of simple assaults by nonstrangers have decreased slightly more among males (34%) than females (25%) over the past three decades. Female rates of this crime grew by about 69% from 1973 to 1994, then fell by 56% from 1994 to 2004. Male rates grew less during the two decades prior to 1994 (24%), and fell by less (47%) in the later decade. For much of the series then, the gender rate ratio is greater than 1, meaning that males are *less* likely to be the victims of a nonstranger simple assault than are females. An examination of the gender rate ratio trend line in Fig. 12 shows some increase over time, from about 0.85 at the start of the series to as high as 1.3 in 2001, although the ratio decreased to about 1.0 again by 2004.

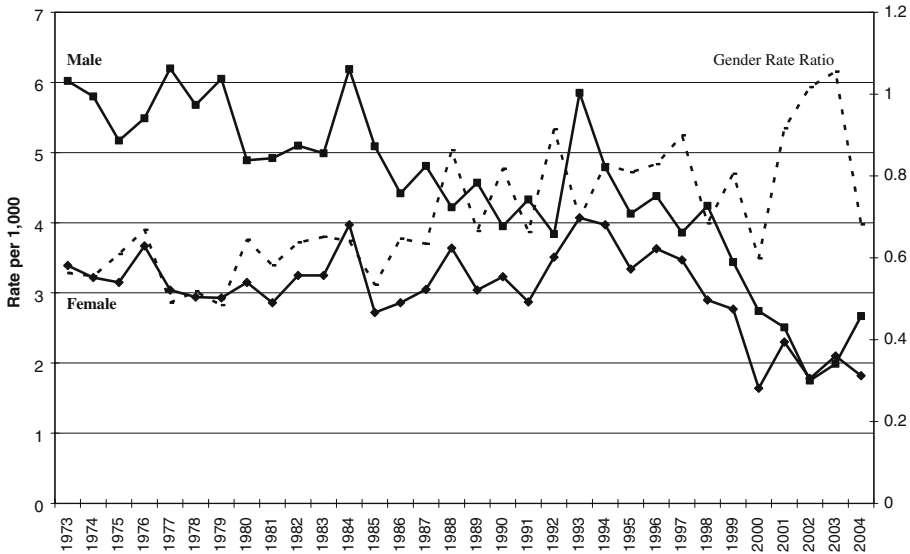


Fig. 10 Nonstranger aggravated assault victimization by gender: 1973–2004

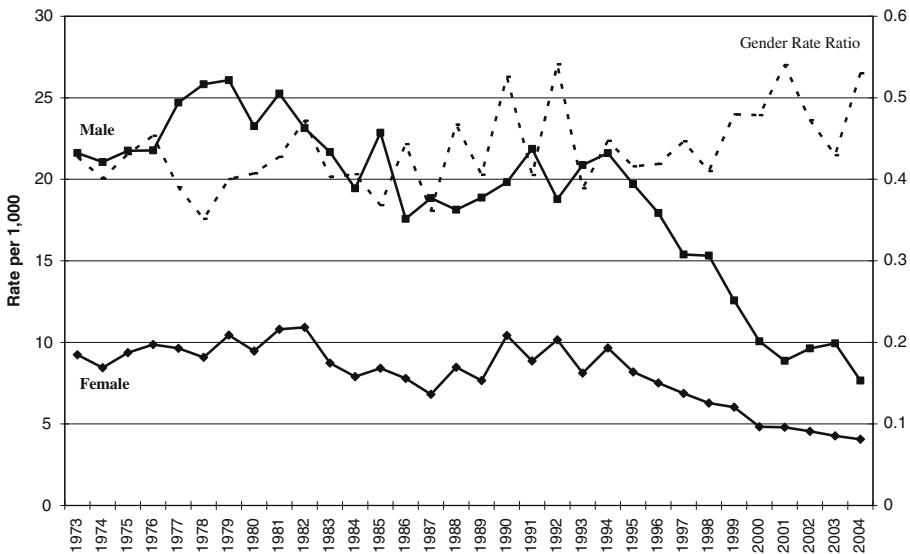


Fig. 11 Stranger simple assault victimization by gender: 1973–2004

Trends in Male and Female Nonlethal and Lethal Intimate Partner Violence

The final set of findings focuses on gender-specific trends in nonlethal intimate partner violence and homicide. As noted above, to examine trends in nonlethal intimate partner violence we use a composite measure of violent victimization that includes rape, robbery,

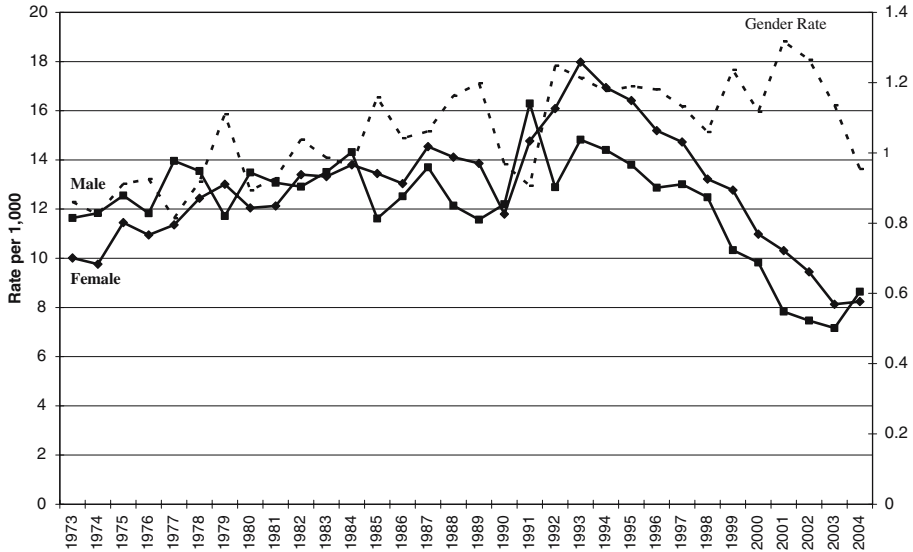


Fig. 12 Nonstranger simple assault victimization by gender: 1973–2004

aggravated and simple assault.¹⁴ This summary index contains a sufficient number of incidents to produce reliable gender-specific trends in intimate partner violence over the past three decades. Figures 13 and 14 display male and female trends in intimate partner homicide and intimate partner violence. Intimate partner homicide rates by gender have appeared in previous studies (for example Dugan et al. 1999; Rosenfeld 2000); here we present additional years of recently available data.¹⁵

Figure 13 shows that unlike stranger and nonstranger homicide, female rates of intimate partner homicide are higher than those of males. Consequently, the gender ratio is consistently higher than 1.0. In 1976, the ratio was 1.1, and by 2004, it had increased to approximately 3.0. The greater decline in male versus female intimate partner homicide rates for 1976–1996 period analyzed by Dugan et al. (1999) continued for several more years and appeared to level off in 2002. The increase in the gender ratio in intimate partner homicide has been primarily driven by greater declines in male victimization rates.

Figure 14 shows the differences in nonlethal intimate partner violence for males and females over the past 25 years. There appears to be little time trend in male victimization by intimate partners from 1979 through 2004, whereas the rates for females appear to increase some between 1979 and 1993, before beginning to decline substantially. The gender ratio is greater than 1.0 for the full period because women are more likely than men to be victimized by intimate partners. In 1979, female intimate partner victimization was

¹⁴ As a composite measure, this index is dominated by incidents that most frequently occur—namely simple and aggravated assault. We also examined the trend in female rape victimization separately to determine whether it was consistent with the trends found for other types of victimization. The trend and level of rape victimization was found to be comparable to that found for female robbery victimization (figure available on request).

¹⁵ Because of the broad purpose of these trend comparisons, we present intimate partner homicide rates with the same denominator (total male and female population) used in the other types of homicide. Previous analyses that have investigated the sources of those changes often estimate rates of intimate partner homicide using a population base of restricted age ranges (e.g., 25–49).

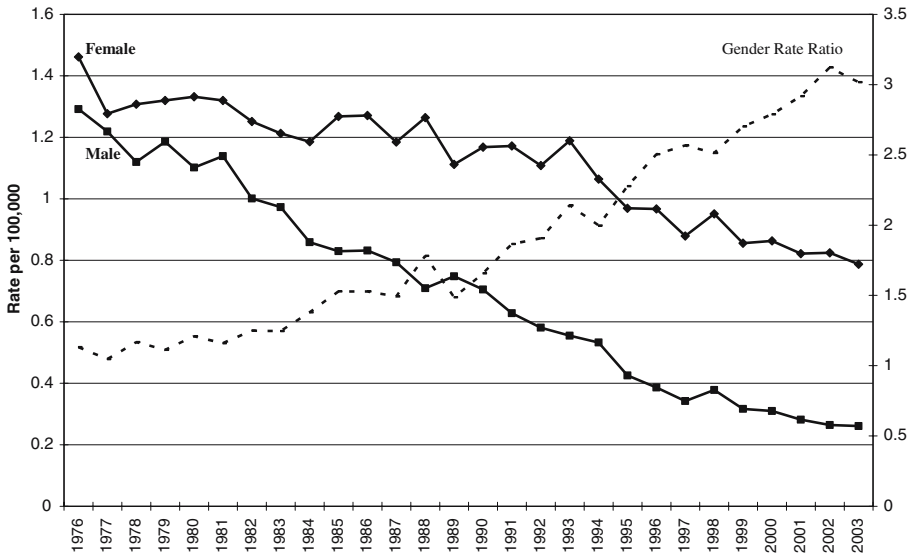


Fig. 13 Intimate partner homicide victimization by gender: 1976–2003

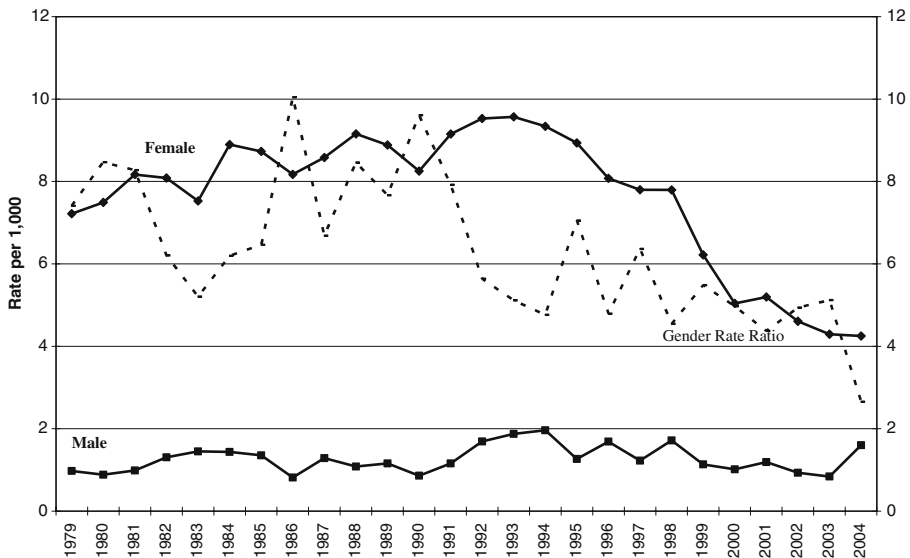


Fig. 14 Intimate partner nonlethal violent victimization by gender: 1979–2004

roughly 7 times the rate of males, while in 2003 the differential was approximately 5 times greater. In 2004, the gap appears to have declined to about 2.6, however this year is unique in the series and may be an outlier.

It is worth noting the differences in the timing of the declines in intimate partner violence and homicide, as well as the differences in the trends in the respective gender

gaps. While male and female intimate partner homicide has been declining since the beginning of the data series, no declines in nonlethal violence are observed until nearly 15 years later. And though the gender gap in nonlethal intimate partner violence may have begun to close because female rates of victimization have recently declined faster than male rates (which are difficult to estimate because of their relative rarity), it had increased fairly steadily for intimate partner homicide.

Summary

Using NCS and NCVS data, we were able to document the rates for different types of nonlethal violence and examine gender-specific victimization trends over the last three decades. In general, the results show that the risks for robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault have declined substantially for both males and females since the early 1970s. The data also indicate that the declines in robbery and aggravated assault against males appear to have started before the decreases of the 1990s, while the decline in various forms of violence against females does not appear to begin until approximately 1993 or 1994.¹⁶

Using these trends, we described changes in the victimization gender gap over the past three decades. The patterns were somewhat mixed. The gender gap in homicide or robbery victimization has remained relatively stable over time. However, the gender gap has closed for aggravated and simple assault victimizations because male rates of victimization have declined more than female rates. When violent events were disaggregated according to whether they had been committed by strangers or nonstrangers, we observed little change in the gender gaps for stranger or nonstranger homicide or robbery. When aggravated and simple assaults were similarly disaggregated, we found, to varying degrees, that the gender gap had closed for stranger and nonstranger aggravated assaults, and nonstranger simple assaults. Where the gender gap appears to be closing, it results from proportionately greater declines in male victimization.

In our examination of intimate partner violence, we note, as have others, that female rates of lethal and nonlethal victimization have been consistently higher than male rates over the past 25 years. However, the patterns of lethal and nonlethal victimization differ. While the gender rate ratio of intimate partner homicide has grown over time, the gender rate ratio of nonlethal intimate partner violence appears to have started to decline in recent years as female rates show greater decreases than are detected in the male rates.

Discussion

The NAS report discussed the need for data to examine how patterns of violence against women have changed over time and to determine whether the changes in crime over the past several decades have affected women and men equally (Kruttschnitt et al. 2004). Although no data can capture all of the complexities of violent events, we believe that the NCS and NCVS can be used to produce a reliable picture of national trends in female and male victimization over the past three decades. The pooled and weighted NCS-NCVS estimates that we provide here show that violent victimization against males and females is

¹⁶ The decline in female rape victimization appears to have begun earlier, around 1984 (figure available on request).

lower in recent years compared to earlier decades, but also that the magnitude and the timing of the decline has varied by gender and crime type. Generally speaking, violent victimization against males and females changed in similar ways during the declines of the mid- to late-1990s, but in dissimilar ways during the 1970s and 1980s.

The goal of this paper has been to present previously unpublished data on trends in female and male victimization. The paper does not attempt to explain definitively the similarities and differences in gender-specific violence trends. The patterns that we uncover represent the first step toward better understanding violence against women over time, and crime trends more generally. The findings are important because they highlight some of the limitations of studies of violence trends and of research that focuses solely on violence against women, and thus emphasize that a comparative approach is critical to our understanding of violence. The findings also suggest some hypotheses about gendered patterns of victimization and changes in the gender gap that can serve as guides for future research.

For the most part, analyses of the recent U.S. crime decline are silent on the issue of gender (but see Rosenfeld 2000). For example, in *The Crime Drop in America* Blumstein and Wallman (2000, p. 10) reasoned that although it is important to disaggregate homicide by ethnicity, age, and type, there is little need to do so for gender because the gender composition of the population does not change rapidly enough to have a large effect on aggregate rates. Our results show that this assumption is reasonable for studies of trends in homicide and robbery where, using self-reported victimization data for robbery, we also found similar trends in male and female victimization. However, our findings suggest that this assumption may be problematic when other forms of violence or longer-term trends are under investigation. Even though the gender composition of the population has not changed, we found that the relationship between gender and assaultive violence has changed over the past three decades. Despite declines in both female and male rates, the *proportion* of aggravated and simple assault victimizations committed against females has increased over the past three decades.

The literature on violence against women has been criticized for its tendency to focus exclusively on female victimization thereby precluding comparative analyses, and for disproportionately emphasizing intimate partner violence when other forms of violence are more prevalent (Kruttschnitt et al. 2004). Our comparison of the trends showed stability in the gender gap in homicide and robbery, but a declining gender gap in aggravated and simple assault. We also found that intimate partner homicide trends were distinct from trends for other forms of violence against women and that the growing gender gap in intimate partner homicide does not match the pattern for the gender gap in nonlethal intimate partner violence. This suggests that explanations of some forms of violence against women may have much in common with broader explanations about violence, but also that there are likely to be unique causes of intimate partner violence. Furthermore, the fact that gender-specific patterns of intimate partner homicide are not the same as those found for nonlethal violence is an important caution about drawing generalizations about violence against women from homicide patterns alone.

A range of factors has been put forth to account for the decline in violence while a different set of factors is prominent in studies of intimate partner homicide. The recent decline in violence has been attributed to factors that are primarily associated with offenders' motivations and constraints, such as the decline in the crack cocaine market, improvements in the economy, increases in imprisonment, and the growth in police (Blumstein and Wallman 2000). Alternatively, existing studies of violence against women (focused exclusively on intimate partner homicide) have emphasized exposure reduction

which may have occurred through declining marriage rates, improvements in women's economic status, and the availability of domestic violence services (Dugan et al. 1999, 2003; Rosenfeld 1997; 2000).

Because there are both sufficient similarities and differences between patterns of violence against women and men, researchers working to understand these phenomena should consider both victim- and offender-oriented factors. In other words, studies of violence against women should consider more broadly how proxies for offender motivations (e.g., economic conditions) and constraints (e.g., imprisonment) may be related to victimization trends, and studies of the recent crime decline should consider whether victim-oriented efforts to reduce violence against women (or children) might be responsible in part for some of the observed changes in overall rates of violence.¹⁷ Given the known relationships between family violence, juvenile violence, and adult offending, a complete explanation of national patterns is likely to require consideration of these interrelated trends.

Not only are crime- and gender-specific trends important to understand, so too are changes in the gender gap. We found that the gender gap closed for aggravated and simple assault and widened for intimate partner homicide because male rates of victimization declined more than female rates. Why have these forms of violence declined more among males than females over the past three decades? What accounts for the differences in the male and female trends prior to the declines of the 1990s? Although we cannot answer these questions in this paper, we use the literatures discussed earlier to offer some ideas and directions for future research.

Some research on criminal *offending* suggests that although violent offending has dropped among both men and women, women's decreases have been less than those of men's and women have accounted for a somewhat greater proportion of all arrests for violence over time (see O'Brien 1999; Heimer 2000). This finding also emerges in a recent analysis of offending using NCVS data, which is not subject to criminal justice system bias (Heimer and Lauritsen 2007). If this is indeed the case, lifestyle and routine activities theories, as well as research on the victim-offender overlap (Lauritsen and Laub 2006) would suggest that females have encountered increasing opportunities for violent victimization *relative to those of men*, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s. In short, decreases in the gender gap in aggravated and simple assault victimization could reflect decreases in the gender gap in offending, to some extent. This is an important topic for future research.

Another potential explanation for the patterns we report is that changing gender roles—more specifically, women's entrance into the labor market—may have had two very different sorts of consequences for violent victimization. As we noted earlier, it is possible that as women have moved into the public sphere, displays of interpersonal violence have become less acceptable. Under this logic, women have acted as capable guardians, or as civilizing influences (Elias 1978), helping to reduce *male* victimization. This comports with the long term declines that we uncover in violence against both men and women, by strangers as well as nonstrangers. Yet, women's increased presence in public life simultaneously creates greater opportunities for victimization, relative to those of men. Consequently, although rates of violent victimization drop for both genders, the decline for females has been less than the decline for males for aggravated and simple assaults.

¹⁷ For an important assessment of the decline in violence against children, see Finkelhor and Jones (2006).

An explanation of the persistence of the gender gap in homicide and robbery victimization is also necessary for a full understanding of violence. The consistency of this relationship over time suggests that the factors identified in the recent literature on the crime decline may apply equally well to male and female victimization for these two particular offense types (Blumstein and Wallman 2000). However, it is not clear why the gender gap should remain fairly stable for homicide and robbery victimization, but not for aggravated or simple assault victimization when it is the case that homicide is often the outcome of aggravated assaults. Additional research is needed to determine why some crimes display persistent victimization gender gaps while others change over time.¹⁸

Future research to account for changes in the gender gap in violent victimization faces significant hurdles because the patterns shown here are complex and differ across crime types and victim–offender relationships. Some of the challenges are empirical and related to data availability. For example, our findings highlight the problem with an over-reliance on official data (UCR and SHR) for understanding crime trends. The patterns that we uncovered cannot be assessed with official data, and indeed, using only official data misses patterns that have important implications for understanding violence against women and the crime drop. Yet, while NCS-NCVS data can provide reliable long-term estimates of violence, they lack detailed measures of proposed theoretical mechanisms that would allow direct testing of various hypotheses. While descriptions such as those presented here can provide fundamental information that can be used inductively to aid understanding of violence trends, the interpretation of this information is most useful when theories of violence can be used to derive specific hypotheses about the issue at hand—in this case, changes in the gender gap in violent victimization.

The theories and hypotheses noted earlier were not developed explicitly for this purpose and the complex patterns we find can be interpreted as consistent with a variety of explanations that are very different from one another (e.g., changes in offending, routine activities, gender equality, domestic violence resources, policing, and imprisonment). An assessment of the contribution of these factors will require additional theoretical development and clarification if we are to understand their potential effects on various forms of violence. These theoretical developments are necessary for understanding past trends and for predicting whether future increases in robbery, for example, would be expected to be accompanied by increases in intimate partner violence against women, or nonstranger assault against males.

In conclusion, our analyses of self-report victimization data from the NCS and NCVS address several of the issues highlighted by the recent NAS report on violence against women, and raise important questions about the relationship between trends in women's victimization and other forms of violence. By comparing male and female rates, we treat violence against women as part of the larger picture of violence in our nation, rather than as a phenomenon detached from violence against men. We move beyond an exclusive focus on intimate-partner violence that, as the report notes, has characterized much of the research on violence against women. Our findings call into question the generalizability of previous research about the relationship between gender and victimization based solely on

¹⁸ Qualitative researchers have found that street robbers do not often select lone females as victims because to use a gun against a woman is seen as unmanly (see Miller 1998). If such beliefs among robbers have not changed over time, then offenders' attitudes about victim selection could account for the sustained gender gap in robbery victimization. It is difficult however, to imagine how one might similarly assess the role of offenders' attitudes about women in homicide situations because target selection processes and dynamics are quite different across the two crime types.

homicide research and demonstrate the insights that are gained by taking a longer view of trends in violence. We hope that the result will be to “broaden the horizons of theoretical dialogue” by encouraging researchers to delve more deeply below the surface in analyses of gendered patterns of violent victimization (Browne and Williams 1993, p. 80).

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