

Populating aging and crime: the peculiar case of Japan's rising elderly crime rate

Over the last three decades, as crime rates in developed countries have increased, Japan's low crime rate has long puzzled criminologists (Park 2005). Many explanations have been proposed, but cultural factors are most often cited—the view that Japan is composed of a homogenous population with a single language and orientation that promotes effective informal social controls (Fujimoto 1994). While Japan continues to be viewed as exceptional for its low crime rate, a peculiar trend has recently emerged that is puzzling to researchers: rising crime rates among the elderly. Over the last ten years, the crime rate among people 65 years and older has nearly tripled (Ministry of Justice 2008). The combination of an increasing elderly crime rate and an aging population has led to a rapid growth in the number of crimes committed by older adults; in 2007, over 12 percent of crimes in Japan were committed by people 65 years and older (Ota 2009). This paper utilizes a unique data source—prefectural level crime statistics—to investigate what aggregate level economic and family structure changes are associated with elderly offending.

Background

At first glance, the rise in elderly crime seems to turn criminological theory squarely on its head. Indeed, this is what US newspapers claimed (Harden 2008). The age-distribution of crime, with a peak in offending in the twenties and a steady, continuing decline in the older years, has been a well-documented “social fact” that has been consistently observed over time and place. As noted by Hirschi and Gottfredson, “...no fact about crime is more widely accepted by criminologists. Virtually all of them, of whatever theoretical persuasion, appear to operate with a common image of the age distribution” (1983). While Greenberg (1985) has since documented differences in the exact shape of the age-crime curve over time and across countries, the decline in offending at the older ages has always been observed.

While Japan's sharply rising elderly crime rate challenges our knowledge about the age-crime relationship, informal social control theories may help to explain this puzzling trend. Laub and Sampson's age-graded theory of informal social control posits that crime occurs when an individual's bond to society is weak and that these bonds (to institutions such as work, family, and school) vary over the life-course (1993). Marriage and fatherhood are the most commonly cited and empirically supported life course changes which correlate with decreased offending; yet, in the case of the elderly in Japan, it is likely that other events such as retirement, loss of spouse, decreased likelihood of living with children, and increased social isolation have weakened bonds and led to increased crime.

It is also possible that the confluence of an aging population and the corresponding inability of economic and family institutions to adequately support older people have led to heightened economic and social insecurity. South Korea, which has been aging rapidly in recent years and has a similarly weak safety net, has also experienced an increase in elderly crime in the last two years (Ota 2009). As more and more countries begin to experience aging populations, elderly crime may become an unanticipated social issue.

General difficulties with accessing individual-level data in Japan (Brinton 2003) and the complete absence of crime-related questions in nationally represented surveys has meant that the only sound, empirically-based analysis of elderly crime to date has come from the government. Japan's Ministry of Justice (MOJ) has published national statistics on crime and has conducted interviews with elderly offenders from various jurisdictions across the country. Although the MOJ surveys are limited to the most serious offenders who receive prison sentences, they have revealed a number of interesting findings. The majority of older offenders (56 percent) committed their first crime at the age of 65 years or older—most are not chronic, repeat offenders but are first-time criminals. Although shoplifting is the most common crime committed for both older men and women, there may be a gender difference in the causes of offending. MOJ surveys found that the majority of older male offenders (66.1 percent) cited neediness as their motive while the majority of older female offenders (63.0 percent) cited thrift, or the desire to save money for the future, as the motive (Ministry of Justice 2008). Family structure may also be an important determinant—the majority of offenders either live alone or with a spouse and very few live with their children, an arrangement which was the most common family structure until recently in 1998, around the same time that the rate of elderly offending began to increase (Ministry of Justice 2008, International Longevity Center 2009).

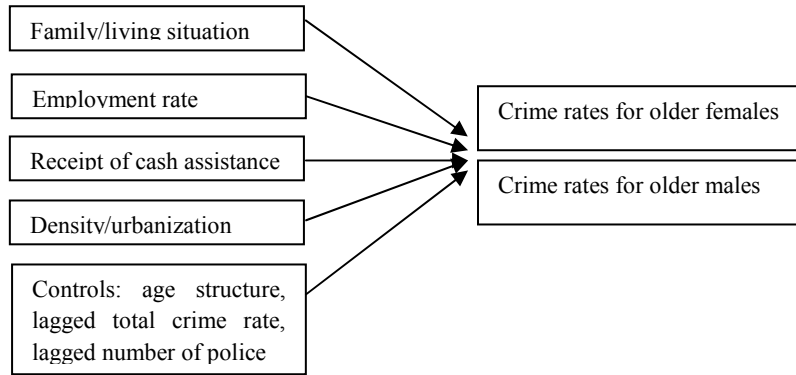
While the MOJ findings provide preliminary support for family structure factors and gender variations for economic motivations, they are simple crosstabulations and do not control for possible confounding variables. They are also limited to a sample of the most serious offenders who serve prison sentences; yet the majority of older offenders either receive a warning or a fine for first time offenses (Ota 2009). This paper provides the first statistical analysis of all elderly offenders in Japan.

Research model

Drawing on age-graded informal social control theory and findings from the MOJ survey, this paper investigates whether family and living situation, economic condition (employment, percentage receiving cash assistance), and density and urbanization

measures are important determinants of crime rates for both older females and older males, at Japan's prefectural level (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Data

This paper utilizes a unique data set of prefectural level criminal offenders, grouped by type of crime committed, gender, and age, covering the years 1998 to 2007 in order to investigate aggregate level determinants of elderly crime. Prefectural level crime statistics have not been previously used to study Japanese crime trends but they provide researchers with the opportunity to conduct sophisticated statistical analysis on a topic that lacks individual-level information (see Park 2005 for a description of commonly analyzed Japanese crime datasets). Prefectural level crime information is published annually by each prefecture's police department and the National Diet Library collects these reports for the majority of Japan's 47 prefectures. While these reports are open to the public, they are time consuming to request and are only available in Japanese. Thanks to a grant from Princeton's Global Network on Inequality fellowship program, the author was able to collect annual prefectural level crime data for 30 of the 47 prefectures over the past ten years. These crime statistics will be merged with the measures described in Figure 1 above, which are available through the Japanese government's annual statistical yearbooks.

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