



No. 164 Imprisonment in Australia: The Offence Composition of Australian Correctional Populations, 1988 and 1998

Carlos Carcach and Anna Grant

Between 1988 and 1998, the number of people in Australian prisons increased from 12,321 to 19,906, an increase of 62 per cent. This paper takes Prison Census figures and analyses the offences for which people were gaoled in 1988 and 1998. It examines trends in the offence composition of Australian prison populations by age, gender, and jurisdiction. In 1988, 7.5 per cent of the total prison population was imprisoned for assault and, in 1998, this figure had increased to 12.6 per cent. It is an increase of 5.1 percentage points. At the same time, in 1988 a quarter (25%) of the prisoner population was imprisoned for break and enter or theft, while in 1998 this proportion had fallen to less than one-fifth (19.1%).

For females, there was an increase in the proportion gaoled for assault from 3.4 per cent in 1988 to 10.4 per cent in 1998, while at the same time the proportion gaoled for drug offences fell from 16.1 per cent to 11.8 per cent.

Prisoners in the 20-34 age groups increased their contribution to the total of inmates held in prison for assault. Older prisoners were held for sex offences more than for any other offence. Of prisoners aged 50-64, 38.9 per cent were gaoled for sex offences in 1998, compared to 18.5 per cent in 1988, and for those aged 65 and over, 56.9 per cent were gaoled for sex offences compared to 23.1 per cent in 1988. By breaking down the offence composition in this way we can learn about changes over time and help structure responses for prison services.

Adam Graycar
Director

The offence composition of a prison population is an imperfect representation of the structure of crime in society. There are several reasons for such a discrepancy. Police come to know only about a fraction of all crimes. Data from the National Crime and Safety Survey conducted in 1998 show that respectively, 74 per cent and 30 per cent of (most recent) incidents of household and personal offences were reported to police (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1999). Police do not record all the reported crime incidents. For example, it has been found that in Queensland a criminal offence report was completed for around one-third of the calls attended by police, but many of these calls may have been related to non-criminal matters (Criminal Justice Commission 1996).

Further, only a minority of recorded crimes is cleared by charge. For example, in New South Wales, 18.5 per cent of residential break and enter, motor vehicle theft, assault, and robbery offences recorded by police in 1996 were cleared by the arrest or identification of suspects. The same data show that 57 per cent of offenders charged with these offences were convicted, and that 15 per cent of these offenders were given prison sentences (Mukherjee and Reichel 1999).

Despite these limitations, the type of offences for which prisoners are either remanded or sentenced may affect the size of prison populations via the impact it has on both the rate at which persons are admitted to prison and the time they spend there.

**AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE
OF CRIMINOLOGY**

trends

&

issues

in crime and criminal justice

July 2000

ISSN 0817-8542

ISBN 0 642 24180 5



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This is the result of interrelated factors such as:

- sentencing decisions associated with the seriousness of crimes known by the courts;
- bail legislation, remission and parole legislation, as well as policy and practice;
- the criminal history of those coming through the courts;
- public perceptions about crime and punishment that may lead to legislative changes;
- patterns of police activity; and
- trends and patterns of criminal activity.

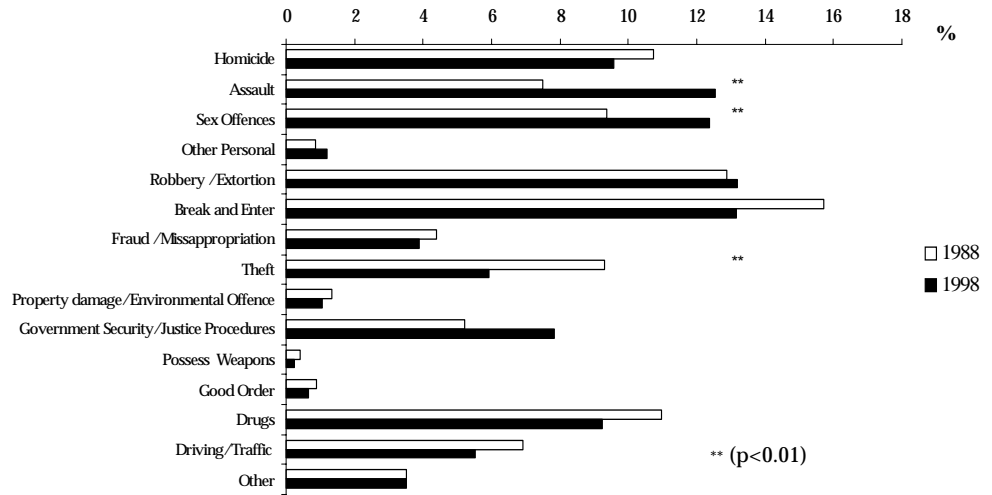
The study of the offences for which individuals are in prison provides information about the evolution of prison populations over time and their difference across jurisdictions. A brief overview of the effect of admission rates upon the size of prison populations can be found in Carcach and Grant (1999).

This study aims to identify the major features of the offence composition of Australian prison populations using data collected as part of the prison censuses conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1998. It examines trends in the offence composition of Australian prison populations by age, gender, and jurisdiction. All prisoners are included in this study, irrespective of their legal status. However, it is reasonable to expect the results to be dominated by the offences served by sentenced prisoners.

Definitional Problems Associated with Offences

The National Prison Census (ABS 1998) records the most serious offence associated with the most recent episode of imprisonment. Counting rules to determine the most serious offence are complex, and, therefore, caution must be exercised when interpreting results based on this variable. For sentenced prisoners, the most serious is defined as the longest sentence received, regardless of the result of any appeals and

Figure 1: AUSTRALIA, 1988 and 1998 Offence Composition of the Sentenced Prison Population



whether the sentence for that offence has expired at census date. With prisoners sentenced for several offences having equal sentence lengths, the most serious offence corresponds to the lowest code in the Australian National Classification of Offences (ANCO).

For unsentenced prisoners, the most serious charge is that which carries the longest statutory maximum penalty. Where penalties are equal, the most serious charge corresponds to the lowest ANCO code.

There are some jurisdictional variations regarding the definition of most serious offence or charge, and these are discussed in ABS (1998, p. 116). The term “most serious offence” is used for the purposes of this study.

Unless the majority of prisoners were associated with a single offence, the offence composition of the prison population can change dramatically depending upon the hierarchy of offences associated with imprisonment. Moreover, it is often not possible to associate variables such as previous imprisonment or legal status with the offence variable. The recorded legal status or previous imprisonment may correspond to an offence other than the current most serious offence.

Trends in Offence Composition

Figure 1 shows the distribution of Australian prisoners for selected

offences in 30 June 1988 and 30 June 1998. Although the graph suggests that some changes may have occurred, a more rigorous analysis indicated that, overall, the offence structure of Australian prisoners has remained stable between 1988 and 1998. The data can also be analysed to answer the question of whether the percentage contribution of specific offences has varied over time. As shown in Figure 1, the offences of assault and sexual assault have experienced a significant increase in their contribution to the total prison population between 1988 and 1998. This seems to have occurred at the expense of a significant decline in the proportion comprised of prisoners convicted for theft.

The reasons underlying these changes are difficult to discern, particularly when data are examined on a national basis, as they mask jurisdictional variations. Nevertheless, crime statistics published by police services show that nationally, the number of recorded serious assaults has increased by 18 per cent from 14,768 during 1987–88 to 17,388 during 1997–98. Sexual offences recorded by police have increased by 295 per cent between 1987–88 and 1997–98. Although sexual offences are problematic in the sense that they are subject to definitional differences among states and territories, their increase seems to be large enough to explain, at least partially, the increase in

their proportional contribution to imprisonment over the 1988–98 period.

Table 1 shows the percentage of composition of most serious offences for the states and territories during 1988 and 1998. Firstly, we may like to ask whether the most serious offence distribution of prisoners within a jurisdiction has changed over the 10-year period between 1988 and 1998. This can be assessed from the Structural Change Index (SCI) (Productivity Commission 1998). In our case, the SCI is defined as the half sum of the absolute value of the differences in the percentages of prisoners classified in specific offence categories over the 2 periods. The SCI can take on values between 0 and 100, with 0 representing no change and 100 indicating a complete reversal of structure¹. In general, the data in Table 1 suggest that the offence distribution of prisoners has remained relatively stable in all the jurisdictions, as the SCIs recorded low values.

The data in Table 1 can be used to assess whether there have been significant changes at the level of individual offences in the states and territories. As shown by the data, the offence of assault has recorded significant increases in contribution to the prison population in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory. In the case of sexual assault, significant increases were recorded in Victoria, Western Australia, and Tasmania. Note that the changes in the contribution of these two offences to the total prison population dominated the changes at the national level. The fact that these changes did not occur uniformly in all the jurisdictions is noteworthy.

The contribution by offences against government security and justice procedures² increased significantly in New South Wales, Victoria, and the Northern Territory. Robbery/extortion increased its share of prisoners in

Table 1: STATES AND TERRITORIES, 1988 and 1998 Percentage Distribution of Prison Populations Most Serious Offence

Most Serious Offence	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT
	1988							
Number of Prisoners	4636 ⁽¹⁾	2071	2374	844	1649	297	381	69 ⁽²⁾
Homicide	9.8	12.7	12.1	10.5	7.5	16.8	12.6	11.6
Assault	8.6	5.2	6.6	7.9	7.0	6.1	16.0	4.3
Sexual Offences	6.6	8.3	14.7	10.8	10.4	4.0	13.4	10.1
Other Against Person	1.3	0.7	0.3	1.2	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Robbery/Extortion	15.4	15.8	10.0	14.1	9.3	4.4	3.1	17.4
Break and Enter	15.8	16.2	15.4	16.7	15.2	20.9	11.5	10.1
Fraud/Missappropriation	4.6	3.7	4.5	4.4	5.5	2.7	2.4	2.9
Theft	10.8	9.1	8.5	5.9	7.6	12.1	11.3	1.4
Property damage/Environmental Offences	1.2	1.4	1.5	2.0	0.6	4.0	1.0	0.0
Government Security/Justice procedures	1.9	8.2	2.4	12.6	8.4	6.7	14.4	5.8
Unlawful Possession of Weapons	0.5	0.7	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.0	0.0
Good order offences	0.4	1.0	0.4	1.9	1.3	1.0	2.1	17.4
Drug Offences	14.9	11.2	9.1	4.5	9.2	2.7	1.6	13.0
Driving Offences	3.2	1.1	4.8	1.2	4.5	16.5	6.6	1.4
1998								
Number of Prisoners	7683 ⁽¹⁾	2858	4466	1385	2352	314	635	213 ⁽²⁾
Homicide	8.2	12.4	10.1	10.5	9.2	13.7	8.5	8.0
Assault	14.4**	5.1	13.8**	12.1**	12.4**	8.0	19.8	8.9**
Sexual Offences	9.8	15.0**	15.1	8.2	16.7**	8.3**	9.0	7.5
Other Against Person	0.8	1.8	0.9	2.2	1.6	0.6	1.9	2.8
Robbery/Extortion	13.9	11.1	14.1	12.5	15.5**	7.0	4.3	15.0
Break and Enter	11.1	11.8	15.2	15.4	16.5	14.0	12.4	11.7
Fraud/Missappropriation	5.1	3.0	2.6	8.4**	1.8	0.6	2.2	2.3
Theft	6.2**	10.0	4.1*	2.6	4.5	8.0	9.0	6.1**
Property damage/Environmental Offences	0.8	0.9	1.4	1.2	0.9	1.0	3.1**	3.3
Government Security/Justice procedures	9.5**	7.1	6.4**	9.3	6.3	8.9	3.6**	6.6
Unlawful Possession of Weapons	0.4	0.0	0.1	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.5	1.4
Good order offences	0.4	1.3	0.3	1.1	0.5	0.6	3.3	0.5**
Drug Offences	10.9**	13.1	6.9	7.4	6.9	1.9	2.5	12.7
Driving Offences	4.8	3.6**	5.4	6.2**	5.5	10.2	16.4**	9.4**
Structural Change Index	19.9	15.2	16.9	17.4	23.1	27.4	23.1	27.9

(1) Excludes sentenced ACT prisoners held in New South Wales prisons.

(2) Prisoners held in the Belconnen Remand Centre plus ACT sentenced prisoners held in New South Wales prisons.

** The difference between the percentages in 1988 and 1998 was significant at the 5 per cent level.

* The difference between the percentages in 1988 and 1998 was significant at the 10 per cent level.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Prison Census 1988 and Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Prisoners 1998.

Table 2: AUSTRALIA, 1988 and 1998 Most Serious Offence Composition of Prisoners Gender

	1988		1998	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Homicide	10.7	11.5	9.5	11.0
Assault	7.7	3.4	12.7	10.4
Sex Offences	9.9	1.1	13.1	1.1
Other Against Person	0.8	1.1	1.2	1.0
Robbery/ Extortion	13.0	10.6	13.3	11.3
Break & Enter	15.9	11.8	13.2	11.9
Fraud/ Missappropriation	3.7	16.4	3.5	10.5
Theft	9.1	12.4	5.7	9.3
Property Damage/ Environmental Offences	1.3	2.0	1.1	0.7
Government Security/ Justice Procedures	5.2	5.4	7.6	11.3**
Possess Weapons	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.1
Good Order	0.9	0.9	0.6	1.2
Drugs	10.7	16.1	9.1	11.8
Driving	3.7	1.4	5.6	2.5
Other Traffic Offences	3.5	0.8	0.1	0.1
Other	3.4	4.8	3.3	6.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

** The difference between males and females was significant at the 5 per cent level.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Prison Census 1988 and Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Prisoners 1998.

Western Australia, the share of fraud/missappropriation increased in South Australia, and that of property damage/environmental offences increased in the Northern Territory. Finally, there was a significant increase in the share of driving offences in the prison populations of Victoria, South Australia, and the territories. None of these changes had a sizeable impact on the changes observed at the national level.

Note that nationally, there was a decline in the proportion of persons convicted of theft in the total prison population between 1988 and 1998. The data in Table 1 suggest that the observed changes in New South Wales and Queensland mostly dominated this decline.

Surprisingly, although there is a great deal of discussion regarding the increases in prisoners remanded or sentenced for drug offences, there was very little difference between jurisdictions and over time in the proportion of prisoners held for these offences. New South Wales was the only jurisdiction where the percentage of prisoners held for drug offences had a significant decline. However, it was not large enough to have an impact on the offence distribution at the national level.

Gender Differentials

The research then sought to determine whether there is a difference between the offence compositions of males and females. Table 2 shows the offence composition for each gender group during 1988 and 1998. There was no significant difference between the offence composition of male and female prisoners in 1988. However, during 1998, differences emerged between the gender groups, which can be explained by a significant decrease in the share of assault and an increase in the share of offences against government security and justice procedures in the female prison population.

It has been speculated that, as a consequence of social and

economic change, levels and patterns of female offending are

changing. We have already mentioned that the data on most

Table 3: AUSTRALIA, 1988 and 1998 Female Prisoners as a Percentage of Total Prisoners Most Serious Offence

Most Serious Offence	1988	1998
Homicide	5.7	6.5
Assault	2.4	4.7
Sexual Offences	0.6	0.5
Other Against Person	6.8	4.6
Robbery/Extortion	4.3	4.8
Break and Enter	4.0	5.1
Fraud/Missappropriation	19.7	15.2
Theft	7.1	8.9
Property damage/Environmental Offences	8.0	3.8
Government Security/Justice procedures	5.5	8.1
Unlawful Possession of Weapons	3.8	2.1
Good order offences	5.5	10.0
Drug Offences	7.8	7.2
Driving Offences	2.0	2.6
Other Traffic Offences	1.2	7.7
Other	7.2	9.9
All Offences	5.3	5.7

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Prison Census 1988 and Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Prisoners 1998.

Table 4: AUSTRALIA, 1988 and 1998 Prisoners as a Percentage of Total Prisoners in Each Age Group Most Serious Offence

	Age Group										Total
	17& Under	18-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-49	50-64	65& Over		
	1988										
Homicide	4.5	4.7	7.1	9.4	11.0	12.8	18.2	25.3	28.8	10.7	
Assault	8.0	8.9	8.4	7.7	6.5	7.1	5.8	5.8	9.6	7.5	
Sexual Offences	10.2	5.0	6.2	7.8	10.0	12.0	15.8	18.5	23.1	9.4	
Other Against Person	1.1	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.9	1.5	1.1	0.8	0.0	0.8	
Robbery/Extortion	4.5	9.5	15.1	16.1	15.0	12.1	6.8	2.7	0.0	12.9	
Break and Enter	30.7	26.8	23.1	18.2	10.8	8.3	4.3	2.3	5.8	15.7	
Fraud/Missappropriation	0.0	1.4	2.1	4.1	4.7	6.2	8.6	10.9	7.7	4.4	
Theft	20.5	20.6	13.3	7.9	6.5	4.9	4.3	4.7	0.0	9.3	
Property damage/Environmental Offences	4.5	2.7	1.7	1.1	1.1	0.5	1.2	0.6	0.0	1.3	
Government Security/Justice procedures	6.8	5.5	6.6	5.7	4.4	3.4	3.6	4.1	1.9	5.2	
Unlawful Possession of Weapons	0.0	0.4	0.3	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.4	
Good order offences	1.1	0.8	1.0	0.9	0.8	0.9	0.5	0.8	1.9	0.9	
Drug Offences	0.0	2.3	4.5	10.1	16.0	19.1	19.0	15.0	9.6	11.0	
Driving Offences	2.3	2.5	3.1	3.1	4.1	4.3	4.8	3.5	1.9	3.6	
Other Traffic Offences	4.5	4.7	3.9	3.1	3.3	2.7	2.1	2.3	3.8	3.3	
Other	1.1	3.6	3.2	3.3	4.2	3.7	3.7	2.7	5.8	3.5	
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	
	1998										
Homicide	1.2	3.9	5.4	8.9	10.0	12.9	13.1	15.8	14.9	9.6	
Assault	14.8	14.0	14.2**	14.5**	14.9**	12.5	8.1	3.9	5.1	12.6	
Sexual Offences	1.2	2.7	4.5	6.7	10.5	13.4	23.4	38.9**	56.9**	12.4	
Other Against Person	0.0	1.2	1.4	1.3	0.9	1.5	1.1	0.9	0.0	1.2	
Robbery/Extortion	7.4	19.4	17.9	15.5	13.1	11.1	7.8	2.9	0.5	13.2	
Break and Enter	34.6	25.8	20.5	15.1	12.2	9.0	4.5	1.1	0.5	13.2	
Fraud/Missappropriation	0.0	1.1	2.0	2.8	4.1	4.5	6.5	8.7	8.7	3.9	
Theft	11.1	10.3	9.0	6.6	4.9	4.0	3.4	1.6	1.5	5.9	
Property damage/Environmental Offences	2.5	2.1	1.3	1.4	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.6	0.5	1.1	
Government Security/Justice procedures	12.3	7.7	10.2	9.4	7.7	7.0	4.9	3.5	2.1	7.8	
Unlawful Possession of Weapons	0.0	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.0	0.2	
Good order offences	1.2	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.7	
Drug Offences	2.5	3.7	4.9	6.8	10.0	12.0	16.2	15.5	7.2	9.2	
Driving Offences	3.7	2.7	4.1	6.7	6.8	6.8	5.3	3.2	0.5	5.5	
Other Traffic Offences	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.1	
Other	7.4	4.0	3.6	3.6	3.2	3.5	4.1	2.6	1.0	3.5	
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	
Structural Change Index	29.4	20.1	14.8	15.1	16.4	14.1	13.4	21.3	37.6	13.2	

** The difference between the percentage in 1988 and that in 1998 was significant at the 5% level. Source: Derived from Australian Institute of Criminology, National Prison Census 1988 and Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Prisoners 1998.

serious offence are far from being the best indicators of the level of offending in society. If present, variations in the share of women in prison for specific most serious offences may, however, be taken as rough measures of change in female offending.

The data in Table 3 show that between 1988 and 1998 the participation of women in the total prison population has increased for most offences, with the exception of fraud and property damage/environmental offences. For the former offence, the contribution of women in 1998 declined by 4.5 per cent relative to 1988, whereas the decline was 4.2 per cent for the latter. Although none of the observed changes were statistically significant, the fact

that the number of females as a percentage of the total prison population has almost doubled for good order offences and that it has grown 6 times for other traffic offences is noteworthy. Overall, the offence structure of the female prison population has remained stable between 1988 and 1998.

Age Differentials

Age differentials in offence composition are important in a number of respects. First, different offences may be associated with different age distributions. Less serious offences are expected to be concentrated around younger age groups than more serious ones. The age structure associated with particular

offences may change over time and this is likely to be associated with changes in policies regarding sentence length or the actual length of imprisonment. Another possibility, more difficult to test with prison census data, is that offending patterns are changing and, as a consequence, the age distribution of particular offences may be shifting either towards a younger or an older average age.

There are two ways to examine age differentials in this case. Firstly, we can ask whether the most serious offence composition of particular age groups has changed over the 10 years between 1988 and 1998. Table 4 shows the percentage distribution of prisoners by most serious offence and age group. Percentages in this Table were

Table 5: AUSTRALIA, 1988 and 1998 Prisoners as a Percentage of Total Prisoners in Each Most Serious Offence Age Group

Age Group	Most Serious Offence															
	Homicide	Assault	Sexual Offences	Other Personal	Robbery/Extortion	Break and Enter	Fraud/Miss-appropriation	Theft	Property Damage/Environmental Offences	Government Security/Justice Procedures	Unlawful Possession of Weapons	Good order offences	Drug Offences	Driving Offences	Other Traffic Offences	Other
1988																
17&Under	0.3	0.8	0.8	1.0	0.3	1.4	0.0	1.6	2.5	0.9	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.5	1.0	0.2
18-19	3.5	9.3	4.1	4.9	5.8	13.4	2.6	17.5	16.0	8.3	7.7	7.3	1.6	5.4	11.2	8.1
20-24	17.3	29.5	17.3	18.4	30.6	38.5	12.7	37.5	33.1	33.5	17.3	28.4	10.7	22.4	30.6	24.1
25-29	19.6	23.0	18.6	21.4	27.8	25.7	20.6	18.9	19.0	24.5	34.6	22.9	20.6	19.0	21.0	21.1
30-34	16.9	14.3	17.5	17.5	19.1	11.4	17.5	11.4	14.1	14.0	21.2	15.6	24.1	18.8	16.4	19.7
35-39	12.3	9.9	13.2	18.4	9.7	5.5	14.5	5.5	3.7	6.9	13.5	11.0	18.1	12.4	8.6	10.9
40-49	18.8	8.6	18.6	14.6	5.9	3.0	21.5	5.1	9.8	7.6	5.8	6.4	19.2	14.7	7.1	11.6
50-64	9.3	3.0	7.8	3.9	0.8	0.6	9.8	2.0	1.8	3.1	0.0	3.7	5.4	3.8	2.7	3.0
65&Over	1.1	0.5	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.9	0.4	0.2	0.5	0.7
Unspecified	0.8	1.2	1.1	0.0	0.1	0.4	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.9	0.0	2.8	0.1	2.7	1.0	0.5
All Ages	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1998																
17&Under	0.1	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.2	1.1	0.0	0.8	0.9	0.6	0.0	0.8	0.1	0.3	0.0	0.9
18-19	2.1	5.8	1.1	5.0	7.6	10.1	1.4	9.0	10.4	5.1	8.3	6.2	2.1	2.6	7.7	5.9
20-24	12.3	24.7	8.0	25.0	29.7	34.2	11.1	33.4	26.4	28.6	27.1	24.6	11.6	16.6	23.1	22.2
25-29	20.7	25.8	12.1	25.0	26.2	25.6	16.2	25.1	29.2	26.8	18.8	20.0	16.4	27.3	30.8	22.8
30-34	17.3	19.8	14.2	12.9	16.5	15.5	17.4	13.8	10.4	16.3	18.8	15.4	18.0	20.9	15.4	15.2
35-39	16.3	12.1	13.2	15.0	10.2	8.3	14.2	8.2	8.5	10.8	10.4	14.6	15.7	15.1	7.7	12.0
40-49	18.6	8.8	25.6	12.1	8.1	4.6	22.5	7.7	9.9	8.5	14.6		23.9	13.1	7.7	15.8
50-64	11.1	2.1	21.2	5.0	1.5	0.6	15.1	1.8	3.8	3.0	2.1	6.2	11.3	4.0	7.7	5.0
65&Over	1.5	0.4	4.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.2	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.0	0.8	0.8	0.1	0.0	0.3
Unspecified	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0
All Ages	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Structural Change Index	7.7	10.8	23.9	11.5	5.2	8.6	7.7	14.0	17.5	9.5	21.3	11.2	12.6	13.1	15.3	9.6

Source: Derived from Australian Institute of Criminology, National Prison Census 1988 and Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Prisoners 1998.

calculated relative to the total number of prisoners in each age group in 1988 and 1998. As shown by the data in Table 4, the SCIs are under 50 for all the age groups, this suggests that no major changes have occurred to the offence structure of the different age groups between 1988 and 1998.

There were, however, significant changes at the level of specific age groups and offences. Prisoners in the 20–24, 25–29 and 30–34 year age groups increased their share in the total of inmates held in prison for the offence of assault. Those aged 50 years and over increased as a percentage of all held in prison for the offence of sexual assault.

Secondly, we can examine whether the age composition of the most serious offences has changed over the 1988–98 period. Table 5 shows the age distribution of prisoners for each most serious offence. The data in Table 5 suggest that the age structure of offences has remained stable over the 1988–98 period as the SCIs are below 50 for all the offences.

Conclusion

In general, the offence composition of Australian prison populations has remained stable over the 10 years between 1988 and 1998. There have been, however, some significant changes at the level of individual offences, in particular assault and sexual assault, each increasing its proportional contribution to the prison population. On the other hand, prisoners remanded, or sentenced, for theft have declined as a percentage of the total prison population.

As expected, there have been changes in the contribution that specific offences make to the total prison population in the states and territories. Offences against government security and justice procedures have increased their share of prisoners in New South Wales, Victoria, and the Northern Territory. Robbery/extortion has increased its share of prisoners in

Western Australia, while fraud has increased in South Australia, and property damage and environmental offences have increased in the Northern Territory. The other offence experiencing increases in its share of prisoners was driving offences, particularly for Victoria and South Australia.

Our results indicate that some differences between the offence structure of male and female prisoners have emerged in 1998, mostly due to declines in the participation of females in assault and an increase in the share of female prisoners sentenced, or charged, with property damage and environmental offences. Whether these results indicate that a change in the offending behaviour of women is occurring is a topic requiring further research.

There have been minor changes in the offence composition of some age groups, most noticeable among prisoners aged 20–34, who have increased their share in the offence of assault. Also among prisoners aged 50 years and over, the percentage charged or sentenced for sexual assault has increased over the 10 years between 1988 and 1998.

Prison census data are biased toward prisoners serving relatively long sentences. Therefore, the offence composition of prisoners counted at census date tends to suffer minor changes. Despite their stability over time, prison populations may conceal substantial underlying activity. For example, the robbery rate has almost doubled during the last 5 years and the prison population has increased by 60 per cent in 10 years; yet the proportion of people in prison for robbery has remained static.

Notes

¹ The SCI is calculated from the following expression: $SCI = \frac{1}{2} \sum |p_{i,t} - p_{i,t-1}|$, where $p_{i,t}$ represents the percentage of remand prisoners that have served a time in category i during period t and $p_{i,t-1}$, $p_{i,t}$ represents the percentage of remand prisoners that have served a time in category i during period $t-1$.

² The overwhelming majority of prisoners counted in this offence category are charged or sentenced for the offences of breach of maintenance order and offences against the enforcement of order.

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Acknowledgement

The authors wish to acknowledge the comments and suggestions of Peter Marshall, Ministry of Justice, Western Australia.

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Note: Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice are refereed papers.