Worldwide there has been growing concern that girls and women today are more violent than in the past. For example, recently published books on how to stop female violence include *Sugar and Spice and No Longer Nice*, *See Jane Hit: Why Girls are Growing More Violent and What Can Be Done about It*, and *Girl Wars*. News stories in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and elsewhere raise concerns about the reportedly alcohol-fueled “shocking rise in violent assaults by women.”¹ Thus far, systematic evidence has derived mainly from official police arrest statistics, and most analyses have focused on the United States. But is there any credence to claims of a widespread increase in female violence?

Two competing hypotheses have emerged to explain the purported rise in female crime and violence. One perspective—the behavior change hypothesis—assumes that changes in women’s lives, such as increased freedoms for women, have spurred increases in female offending. The other, more skeptical, perspective is that an increase in police-reported female violence is largely a product of changes in social control practices that regulate the use of (female) violence. This is the policy change hypothesis. Where female offending has become more visible to police, it is in part because the definition of violence has expanded to include more minor acts of aggression and violence, the sorts of crimes in which women are more likely to be involved.

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Jennifer Schwartz
In this paper, I explore evidence on the question of whether female involvement in violence is increasing, as measured across a variety of data sources and across different stages of the criminal justice system. To broaden the scope of inquiry, I offer a comparative analysis of three English-speaking countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada) and three Scandinavian countries (Finland, Norway, and Sweden). By comparing trends across places, offenses, and stages of the criminal justice system, this analysis aims to examine the places where officially recognized female violence is rising and to make inferences as to why this is so.

First, I overview the two theoretical frameworks: the behavior change hypothesis and the policy change hypothesis. Next, I review previous research on female violence trends, primarily for the United States. I then describe various data sources from between 1985 and 2006, including Interpol homicide data and arrest, prosecution/conviction, and imprisonment data from the United Nations World Survey on Crime Trends and Criminal Justice Systems and the European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics. Finally, I evaluate the evidence to support either the policy change or the behavior change hypothesis.

Theoretical Frameworks

Two basic hypotheses have been advanced to explain the purported rise in female arrests for violence and crime. The behavior change hypothesis assumes that changes in women’s lives have spurred real increases in female offending. Such changes in women’s lives include greater freedoms but also more stresses and strains. In contrast, the policy change hypothesis is that female offenders have become more visible to law enforcement and more vulnerable to arrest because of changes in the social definitions of violence to include more minor forms of aggression such as those that girls and women have always been involved in.

Toward the behavior change hypothesis, girls’ and women’s lives and experiences have changed in ways that increase motivations and opportunities to engage in violence. One variant of this hypothesis identifies recent shifts in the organization of gender and underlying gender-role expectations toward greater female freedom and assertiveness. Evolving gender roles could “masculinize” female behavior, increasing female motivations for physical aggression or attack.
Exposure to media messages condoning violent women also might facilitate changes in gender expectations. Therefore, in this hypothesis, girls and women increasingly may use violence as a coping strategy or as a means to solve interpersonal conflicts. At the same time, girls and women today face greater struggles in maintaining a sense of self, conforming to complex, often contradictory, sets of behavioral scripts that specify what is appropriate, acceptable, or possible.\textsuperscript{5} Heightened role strain and conflict between what is supposed to be possible and what is actually available for women may cause frustration, provoking violent responses to stressful incidents and lives. The combination of traditional and newer female stresses may increase women’s violent propensities.

A second variant of the behavior change hypothesis, economic adversity and poor marriage pools may be another relevant life change affecting women in ways that have spurred increased violent offending.\textsuperscript{6} As part of the feminization of poverty, higher divorce rates and shifts in community social organization toward female-headed families may affect female violence as much or more than male violence. This is perhaps because women’s economic health and personal well-being are more dependent on domestic arrangements and relationships than men’s and also because kin networks that act as buffers against victimization are diminished while greater economic hardship may lead to more involvement in violence by women.\textsuperscript{7} Increasing economic inequality among women and between the sexes is a mechanism that might contribute to increased female violence. Faced with greater constellations of disadvantage, women increasingly may resort to physical attack or threat as a coping strategy for dealing with disadvantaged surroundings or for confronting conflicts with partners, children, extended family, neighbors, other women, or authority figures.\textsuperscript{8}

The policy change hypothesis presents an alternative explanation that takes a more skeptical standpoint on the meaning of increases in the rates of female arrests. Early criminologist Otto Pollak warns: “Every investigation of the female crime rate is, first of all, faced with the question whether criminal statistics are adequate tools for gauging changes which the real criminality of women may undergo with the years.”\textsuperscript{9} The possibility that rising female arrest trends are an artifact of social control policies relies on the interplay between the way that violence is measured in official police data and patterns of violence by
gender. Crucially, there is variability in the gender/violence relationship across different types of offense. The female share of involvement is greater for violent offenses that are less serious, involve less offender culpability, and occur in private settings and against intimate relations and/or family victims. Serious, injury-producing violence is largely perpetrated by men, whereas women commit minor violent acts nearly as often as men. Women’s violence more typically takes place within or near the home and against family members or others close to the offender. In comparison, men’s violence occurs more frequently in public settings and is perpetrated against friends or strangers. Men’s violence is also far more likely than women’s violence to produce serious injury, and much female violence is attributed to self-defense. Abundant research suggests that women typically assume less culpable roles such as being an accomplice or a bystander when engaged in physical aggression within mixed-sex peer groups.

It is important to note that official definitions of violence are elastic. Citizens, police, and other officials exercise discretion in deciding how to define violence. Identifying what constitutes violence and distinguishing between serious and less serious violent offenses requires subjectivity in inferring intent to commit harm, how much harm the offender wished to inflict, and the severity of the harm inflicted. These definitions figure both into individual’s decisions to report victimization and police decisions to take criminal action, including arrest. For example, a police officer responding to domestic violence may arrest one or both partners depending on how the officer views the source of the primary aggression, evaluates the severity of injuries, and assesses self-defensive versus aggressive actions. Because arrest categories in police data are broad, offense categories such as misdemeanor and felony assault include a heterogeneous mix of behaviors and culpability levels.

Police policy and enforcement changes may have enhanced the visibility and reporting of female violence relative to the past and to contemporary male violence. Several types of policy shifts may have escalated the arrest-proneness of women, independent of any actual changes in female aggression. Some policy shifts are gender neutral but have gender-specific effects on arrest trends; other policy shifts are more overtly gender specific.
One such policy shift, net widening—or the criminalization of less serious forms of violence—will increase female arrests because female offending tends to be less serious and less chronic.\footnote{Criminalization of less serious forms of violence includes targeting minor forms of law breaking and charging up minor offenses into more serious offense classifications. Net widening is more likely to occur for more ambiguously defined offenses such as misdemeanor or aggravated assault as compared to homicide.} For example, at the margins of what is classified as a violent offense are aggressive behaviors such as pushing or shoving or throwing things at someone. Increasingly more serious acts of violence are slapping, biting, kicking, hitting with a fist, hitting with an object, choking, threatening with a weapon, and using a weapon. The dividing line between what is a minor form of violence and what is serious violence is not clear-cut. Moreover, distinguishing felony from misdemeanor assault and from lesser offenses, such as disorderly conduct or harassment, relies on subjective assessments of intent and degree of injury. If elastic definitions of violence are now more inclusive, as several scholars suggest, female assault arrests might increase without any corresponding change in offender behavior simply because there is a greater share of women in the pool of less serious offenders being targeted for arrest.\footnote{A second policy shift is the criminalization of violence occurring between intimates and in private settings such as in the home or at school/work, which portrays female levels of violent offending that more closely approximate male levels because female violence is more likely to take place in these contexts than against strangers in public settings. Recent studies document that a trend toward treating domestic and school/workplace violence as a criminal matter, in conjunction with dual-arrest strategies, has had an impact on female assault arrest trends. Thus, seemingly gender-neutral net-widening policy shifts such as criminalizing more minor forms of aggression and violence, including among intimates in private settings, have gender-specific consequences. To the extent that criminal justice practices target minor physical aggression and violence occurring in private settings and against intimates, violence measures are more encompassing and female violence will seem more frequent. Finally, more gender-equal attitudes and application of the law will augment female arrests. Curtailed discretion of criminal justice}
officials and the legal trend toward equality of the sexes increase female culpability. Changing public and police attitudes toward female suspects also may affect female arrest rates. An increased emphasis of legal equality of the sexes, the changing role of women in society, and the perception that women are becoming more violent may all increase the willingness of victims of female crime to report female suspects to the police and for the police to proceed more formally in processing female suspects.

Previous Research: Case Study of the United States
Given the multiple meanings that may be imputed to arrest trends, it is important to triangulate information by examining other data sources. Alternative sources of data provide another lens through which to view violent offenses and benchmark changes in female violence levels as compared to male violence levels. The use of multiple data sources also provides more evidence to enhance confidence in conclusions about the direction of trends in violent behavior. Previous empirical research on gender gap trends in violence has focused almost entirely on the United States. I review those findings and describe how this study extends them.

Among the first studies to empirically address heightened concern over the modern female crime “wave” of the 1970s, Darrell Steffensmeier and colleagues probed arrest data and found notable female arrest increases for minor property crime but little change for most forms of violent crime.\(^7\) The female share of criminality increased slightly for robbery, but decreased for aggravated assault and remained about the same for homicide and simple assault. Qualitative and national survey research showed essentially no change in victim reports of violent offenses throughout the mid-1970s, including for robbery.\(^8\) Robert O’Brien verified these findings using advanced time series techniques to address the problem of arbitrarily identifying “significant” changes in gender gap trends; he also extended the period under examination from 1960 through 1995.\(^9\) With respect to violence, O’Brien’s findings for this longer time period are similar to those of Steffensmeier and Michael Cobb. Between 1960 and 1995, the homicide gender gap significantly widened, and the aggravated assault gender gap did not change appreciably over the same time. As also reported by Steffensmeier and Cobb, the robbery gender
gap significantly converged, albeit at a low rate of change. The larceny gender gap converged between 1960 and 1975, with no significant change thereafter. Thus, for the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, arrest data provide little evidence of appreciable change in the violence gender gap in the United States. This is not the case in more recent years.

Steffensmeier and colleagues’ recent work compared gender gap trends in arrests with data independent of the criminal justice system, providing a more stringent test of behavior versus policy change accounts of arrest trend changes in the United States since the 1980s. Employing time series methods advised by O’Brien, Steffensmeier and colleagues found that the gender gap in adolescent assault arrests narrowed significantly, but neither women’s share of self-reported assault nor victim-reported assault changed much. Steffensmeier and colleagues confirmed the same pattern for offenders of all ages. In contrast to earlier periods, the nation’s major sources of crime trend information disagreed about whether the gender gap for violent crime had narrowed over the past twenty years.

Steffensmeier and associates located shifts in women’s relative assault arrests as originating from policing practices that target minor forms of offending and enhance the visibility of women’s aggressions. In a rare in-depth study of police files on robbery, Meda Chesney-Lind and Vickie Paramore provide insight into such a dynamic. Throughout the 1990s, there was a downward shift in the value of items taken and the age of offenders; during the same period, the female share of robbery arrests tripled in Honolulu, suggesting net-widening police practices and their gender-specific impact. Despite abundant evidence from victim reports, self-reports, and qualitative data, the conclusion that any changes in the gender gap for violent offenses across the 1990s are policy generated is not without controversy.

Janet Lauritsen and colleagues reanalyzed data on victim-reported, nonlethal violent offenses and concluded that the gender gap for violent offenses had narrowed definitively. Jennifer Schwartz et al. reexamined victim-reported findings, verifying and extending Steffensmeier et al.’s initial conclusions that any narrowing of the gender gap for violent offenses was minimal and driven by minor forms of assault that women traditionally have committed. Schwartz et al. ascertained key methodological differences in the way that rates of violent offenses were estimated by Lauritsen’s and Steffensmeier’s
research teams and, in doing so, demonstrated the importance of employing feminist methods that take into account the gendered nature of crime and the measurement of crime.²⁵

For example, victim-reported data include information on the crime incident as well as the number and sex composition of offenders involved in the crime, allowing researchers to select various units of analysis. To calculate rates of violent crime, Steffensmeier’s research team elected to count female and male offenders because that unit of analysis is most comparable to offender-based arrest statistics and is one that more accurately accounts for female-typical co-offending patterns, such as the fact that women are usually far outnumbered by men in mixed-sex crime groups. Lauritsen et al., however, employed the crime incident as the unit of analysis and questionably attributed all violence by mixed-sex crime groups only to female counts of violence, confounding male and female changes in violent behavior. In a second major methodological difference, Lauritsen et al. neglected to make sex-specific adjustments to rate estimates necessitated by the 1992 major survey redesign, which elicited more reports of nonstereotypical and privatized forms of violence in which women are more likely to engage. Lauritsen et al.’s decisions distorted gender gap estimates, leading to inaccurate conclusions regarding the direction of trends. Yet despite these different methodologies, Schwartz et al. questioned the extent to which even Lauritsen et al.’s findings supported their conclusion that the gender gap in violent behavior had meaningfully changed over the 1990s. Since 1993, the gender gap in robbery trends fluctuated between 13 and 15 females per 100 males. On balance, the evidence shows greater stability than change in the gender gap for violent behavior in unofficial sources. In contrast, female representation increased among assault arrestees across the 1990s.

To further develop Steffensmeier and colleagues’ position that more punitive targeting of less serious offenders disproportionately increased female offenders’ visibility to law enforcement, Schwartz et al. tracked gender gap trends across criminal justice stages for both minor and serious violent offenses.²⁶ If the nature or extent of women’s violent behavior has not changed, the gender gap may narrow at the arrest stage, the first and most encompassing stage of the criminal justice system, but later stages in the administration of justice will filter out many of those who are pulled into the system. Schwartz et
al. leverage national post-arrest conviction and imprisonment trend data against unofficial and arrest data for a range of violent offenses in order to assess whether women’s violent behavior has worsened or whether the policy change hypothesis—that more encompassing violence definitions will manifest in gender-disproportionate effects at earlier criminal justice stages and only for more minor offenses—prevails.²⁷ Findings supported the policy change position. The gender gap in arrests for serious violence, such as homicide, did not change, whereas the gender gap for felony and especially misdemeanor assault narrowed significantly. However, by the conviction stage, a greater proportion of female than male violence cases were dropped out of the system by prosecutors or judges. Yet, there were spillover effects of increased use of arrest on women; the gender gap in violent convictions narrowed somewhat in the 1990s although not nearly as much as the gender gap in arrest rates. By the imprisonment stage, the system had virtually corrected itself—the gender gap in imprisonments did not narrow at all.

Another important finding from the research is that assault trends are key to understanding the seeming rise in female arrests. Schwartz et al. review the quality and balance of evidence on trends in female violence across a range of offense types and data sources in the United States and conclude, “Assault is driving claims and conceptions of rising female-to-male violence. But even for assault, arguably the most ambiguously defined violent crime, there is contrary evidence depending on data source.”²⁸ Arrest data was the only source showing any meaningful change in the gender gap when compared to self-reports, victim reports, and other sources. This body of findings that focused on the United States calls into question whether purported increases in female arrests in other countries are real.

Few published articles have explored female violence trends in countries other than the United States. However, some recent studies focused on Great Britain, Canada, and Australia, based primarily on official arrest data, indicate an increase in female-to-male involvement in crime. In Great Britain, Sandra Walklate identified a narrowing gender gap in adolescent delinquency in the 1990s. Likewise, in Canada, arrest rates for adolescent girls seem to have increased between 1980 and 1996.²⁹ However, Kerry Carrington’s analysis of trends for selected years between 1961 and 2004 in adolescent criminal matters
in Australia gives reason to question whether female-to-male rates of crime and violence are on the rise in predominantly English-speaking countries. Carrington found girls’ increased involvement in official statistics coincided with legislative and policy shifts that relabeled status offenses such as running away or truancy as criminal. Emma Ogilvie, Mark Lynch, and Sue Bell further posit that the change toward separate child welfare and juvenile justice systems effectively, albeit unintentionally, “led to a stream of young women being processed as delinquent, who otherwise, in all likelihood, would have proceeded through a sexualizing process as welfare cases.” As in the United States, net-widening social control policies may increase disproportionately women’s appearance in official arrest statistics for minor offenses.

Focused on violence trends for Sweden, Felipe Estrada explored hospital admissions data on injuries due to violence between 1974 and 2002 and compared them to a variety of other violence statistics. Whereas police statistics showed long-term increases in assault, Estrada reported no corresponding increase in healthcare data. He concluded that “the increase in assaults reported to the police remains the only clear indicator that violent crime is on the increase in Scandinavia.” The discrepancy in trends between official arrest data and other assault measures indicates net-widening socio-legal definitions of violence: “It is likely that the range of acts viewed as sufficiently serious to warrant reporting to the police has expanded.” However, it is not yet known how female and male assault arrest trends compare in Scandinavia.

The present research systematically compares gender gap trends in violent offenses across several countries. It extends previous research on gender gap trends by examining official data on violent behavior for later stages of the criminal justice system. Our analysis focuses on the question: Is female involvement in violence increasing cross-nationally and, if so, where and why? This research is an initial effort to identify where and when women’s violence is increasing as part of a larger research agenda that ultimately will include predictive analyses focused on understanding why, in some places and time periods, women’s propensity to violence has increased relative to men’s. At present I have selected six countries in order to examine cross-national gender gap trends in violent offenses from 1985 to 2006 across successive stages of the criminal justice system and estimated from various official sources.
Data and Methods

Sample
I selected for examination two sets of three nations—the predominantly English-speaking countries of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada and the Scandinavian countries of Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Prior research guided this selection of the English-speaking nations. The Scandinavian countries provide an interesting comparison because these nations maintain among the highest levels of gender equality in the world. This assessment is supported by structural indicators such as labor market equality (low wage-gap inequality, high full-time labor force participation by women), family-related measures (age at first marriage, division of household labor), political representation, and state policies that are supportive of women (family leave, antidiscrimination employment laws). Additionally, cross-national studies of attitudes supportive of gender equality conclude that the greatest levels of egalitarianism are found in the Scandinavian countries—particularly Sweden—and lower egalitarianism levels in the English-speaking countries, especially the United States. Thus, these countries are useful to examine a key assumption of the behavior change hypothesis—that greater gender equality is associated with greater female participation in violence. If true, Scandinavian countries should exhibit uniformly higher levels of female participation than the English-speaking countries. Our selection also was guided by data quality concerns. These six countries had among the most highly consistent reporting histories, a precondition of over-time analyses, and these countries reported on the majority of violence indicators of interest.

Data
Several sources of official data are uniformly available over time for cross-national female crime trend analyses. I use each of these sources because they include different measures of female-to-male violent offending and have varying limitations and years of availability. Interpol, the international police organization, collects aggregate national counts of offenses and male/female offenders from police representatives in various countries. Standardized definitions of offenses are provided, however, no quality control measures are used to verify data.
Unfortunately, Interpol stopped making these data publically available in 2000. I use data from 1985 to 1999 to assess homicide trends.\textsuperscript{38} The \textit{United Nations World Survey on Crime Trends and Criminal Justice Systems} is a collection of aggregate figures on four areas of crime and criminal justice: police, prosecution, courts, and corrections. I draw on sex-specific data on suspects/arrestees\textsuperscript{39} who encounter various stages of the criminal justice system from 1985 to 2006. Government justice employees and coordinating officers in United Nations member countries compile the data and the United Nations applies modest quality control checks. These data are official statements by national governments and are considered to be more valid than Interpol data.\textsuperscript{40} The \textit{European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics} began publishing crime data in 1990 in response to demand for high quality data. Modeled after the \textit{Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics} in the United States, the European version offers data on numbers of offenders by crime type and the percentage that are female. Sex-specific criminal justice data on rates of convictions and imprisonments are collected every five years. Data from official records are collected and verified by a national correspondent who is an expert on criminal justice statistics, often a Ministry of Justice employee or academic. Standard classification schemes are used, deviations from the scheme are reported in detailed data documentation, and agreed-upon quality control measures are applied to ensure data accuracy and reliability.

These data represent the best, and perhaps the only longitudinal sources on cross-national female (and male) participation in violent behavior. Previous research in the field employs these sources to produce comparable estimates for comparative purposes, attesting to data reliability over time, although homicide and robbery data were judged to be the most reliable and valid measures of crime and violence.\textsuperscript{41} However, there are several caveats to working with cross-national data.

Country participation varies from year to year, hampering construction of a complete time series. Even countries with strong reporting histories fail to report some violence indicators in any given year. Quality control checks by sponsoring agencies vary to some degree; those that do not engage in these checks may estimate violence with less accuracy, producing more “noise” in the data and wider yearly fluctuations in estimates. Likely to be the most accurate,
European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics reports are collected from experts who are in communication with the sponsoring agency. All countries use standard offense classification schemes, and detailed data documentation are available on reporting idiosyncrasies by some nations. However, even with standard classification schemes, as noted earlier about official data sources, legal standards and informal working definitions of violence change over time and vary across nations.

Measures and Methods
The female percent is a widely accepted measure of the gender gap in violent offending. Calculated by dividing the female rate by the sum of the female and male rate \[ \frac{\text{female rate}}{\text{female rate} + \text{male rate}} \times 100 \], it reflects the population-adjusted share of arrestees and/or offenders who are women. The female percent increases if female rates increase while male rates increase less, are stable, or decline. The female percent can also increase if female rates do not decline as fast as male rates.

Net widening is examined using two measures of whether less serious forms of violence have increasingly been criminalized by citizenry and police: (1) the assault-to-homicide ratio and (2) the case flow from arrest to imprisonment. Homicide and assault offenses typically are similarly motivated and share similar demographic and social correlates. In base terms, assault is an unsuccessful homicide or, more typically, a homicide is an assault that went too far. The ratio between the two behaviors ought to be near constant. However, in times of changing social definitions and constructions of what constitutes violent offending, the ratio of assaults per homicide may increase as official actions against more minor forms of aggression increase. Whereas police have wide latitude to define an aggressive incident as an assault or not, there is less discretion in labeling homicide.

With case flow data, we can assess the extent to which the mobilization of law is directed against minor offending and whether this sociolegal change is gender specific in its effects by comparing the female percent for arrests, prosecutions, and imprisonments. Real increases in female violence should be reflected in fairly uniform increases in the female percent across each stage of the criminal justice system. If arrest policies have changed in ways that target female offending patterns, the female percent may narrow over time in arrest data, but increases should be less or nonexistent for each successive stage of
the criminal justice system as it filters out cases that are less serious, unsubstantiated, or involve offenders with limited culpability.\textsuperscript{43}

The analytic plan is to plot trends in the gender gap across various measures of violent offending for six different countries. These plots visually demonstrate during which time periods, for which countries, and according to which source the gender gap in violent offending has narrowed. For between-nation comparisons, I consider a 5 percent difference in the female percent to be of substantive importance. For within-nation changes in the gender gap trend, the null hypothesis is \textit{no change} in the gender gap. Thus the burden of proof is on demonstrating substantively important and sustained changes in the gender gap. I treat as a notable pattern of gender gap change a sustained trend of five or more consecutive years over the fifteen- to twenty-five-year period at a rate greater than 1 percent per year.

\textbf{Findings}

First, I examine sex-specific assault-per-homicide trends for the United States to confirm findings of previous research that net widening is occurring and affecting female arrest trends more than male arrest trends. A trend toward more assaults per homicide is evidence that definitions of violent behavior have widened to incorporate less serious and previously more hidden forms of aggression. The ratio of simple assaults per homicide steadily rises, with steeper increases for both females and males after 1990. The assault-to-homicide ratio is fairly even for females and males between 1980 and 1990, but thereafter, the female percent increases exponentially. In 1990, there are roughly fifty simple assault arrests per homicide for both sexes (a 50:1 ratio); by 2000, the ratio has increased to 75:1 for males and 175:1 for females. These findings provide evidence of net widening (ratio increases for both sexes) with gender-specific consequences (the ratio increases much more for females than males).

Homicide is among the most reliably measured offenses, providing a good marker of serious violence trends. Homicide data were contributed by each of the six nations. Comparing gender gap trends in homicide for the English-speaking nations (figure 2, panel A) shows that female involvement in this serious violent crime has not increased since at least 1985 in any of these three nations. In the United States, between 1985 and 1990, the share of homicide offenders who were
female dropped from about 13 percent to 10 percent and has remained steady for the past decade. Canada’s female percent remains steady, around 12–13 percent. The female share in the United Kingdom is somewhat lower than in the United States and Canada, between 6 percent and 9 percent, but it displays greater year-to-year variability. Figure 2, panel B, illustrates the female percent of homicide for the three Scandinavian countries examined. The female share of homicide is stable for Finland (~13 percent) and Sweden (~10 percent) and declines in Norway from about 10 percent in the mid-1980s to about 5 percent by 1999.

Of note, the gender gap is remarkably similar in magnitude across nations — clustering around 10 percent. It is not the case that Scandinavian countries have uniformly lower female participation in homicide, despite their greater levels of gender parity as compared to the English-speaking countries and as might be anticipated by the behavior change hypothesis.

Supporting the policy change hypothesis, there is no increase in the female share of homicide for any of the six countries under examination. In fact, the gender gap has widened (i.e., the female
percentage has declined) in the United States and Norway. This find-
ing is evidence against the behavior change hypothesis, which antici-
pates female increases for all offense types, including homicide.

**Figure 2.** The gender gap in homicides, 1985–1999

**Panel A: Canada, US, UK**

**Panel B: Finland, Norway, Sweden**

Case flow data permit within-nation comparisons of gender gap violence trends. If women in some countries are now more violent, their representation will rise across all stages of the criminal justice system. On the other hand, if broadened standards of violence are employed by victims and by police, the gender gap will increase successively less at later case-processing stages, as each stage selects more culpable offenders who commit more serious violence into the criminal justice system. One advantage of the *United Nations World Survey on Crime Trends and Criminal Justice Systems* is its yearly availability and sex-specific data. (Note: in figure 3, some missing values are imputed based on an average of surrounding years’ data.) However, the sex-specific data are only available for overall offenses and not for specific offenses such as assault. To address this limitation, I examine trends in assault as a share of total offenses in order to gauge the increasing role of assault in yearly arrest patterns that would suggest net-widening practices.\(^4\) I also draw on the *European Sourcebook* to complement the *United Nations World Survey*. Though not available yearly, the *European Sourcebook* does offer sex-specific assault data across criminal justice stages. The United Kingdom did not contribute sex-specific suspect data to the *United Nations World Survey*, and the United States reported only sex-specific arrestee data, but not prosecution or imprisonment data.

Figure 3 depicts gender gap trends for arrest (panel A), prosecution (panel B), and imprisonment (panel C) data. Examining panel A, it is apparent that the United States is the only country showing a steady rise in the female percent of arrests, from under 20 percent in 1985 to just over 30 percent by 2006. No other country shows a rise of more than a few percentage points. The female percent of arrests in Norway and Finland increases over the same period by only about 3 percent. The female percent of arrests in both Canada and Sweden show essentially no change, remaining at between 20–21 percent. To summarize, in 1985, all six countries had female percentages of arrests clustered between 15–20 percent. In 2006, the female percentages remained clustered between 17–23 percent in all the countries except the United States where the female percent of arrests increased to 30 percent. Clearly, the United States is an outlier in terms of growth in the female share of arrests over the past two decades.
Figure 3. Case flow of female percent of arrests, prosecutions, and imprisonments for all offenses, 1985–2006

Panel A: Female percent of arrests

Panel B: Female percent of prosecutions
Panel C: Female percent of imprisonments

Panel D: Assault as a percent of all offenses (1990–2006)

Data on trends in the female percent of all prosecutions (figure 3, panel B) reveal the United Kingdom to be an outlier in terms of growth in the female percentage of prosecutions. Between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, women comprised about 15 percent of all prosecutions in the United Kingdom. After 1997, however, the female percent grew steadily such that women by 2006 make up one-quarter of all prosecutions. In Sweden and Norway, the female share was a fairly stable 15 percent for the majority of the period examined. Finland, too, showed a steady female share of 15–17 percent of prosecutions. Over the past three or four years, there was a small rise in the female percent, but thus far it appears to be a short-term trend (or data noise) and only a small gain (~3 percent). Thus, the United Kingdom, but not the Scandinavian countries, witnessed a sustained and sizeable increase (10 percent) over the past decade in the female share of prosecutions.

Comparing suspect and prosecution data (panels A and B) within the Scandinavian countries, the female share was very comparable across the first two stages of the criminal justice system—arrests and prosecutions. In Norway, the female share for both arrests and prosecutions was about 15 percent. In Finland, the female share of arrests was uniformly about 2 percent greater than the female share of prosecutions, and similarly in Sweden the female share of arrests was uniformly about 5 percent greater than for prosecutions. That is, there was no change in the effect of gender over time between these two stages of criminal justice in either country. It is common for the female percent to decrease across different stages of the criminal justice system, as it did in Finland and Sweden, because there are many legally relevant reasons why more female offenders than male offenders have their cases dropped between arrest and prosecution, including the facts that women in offender partnerships and groups are typically less central to the commission of the crime and criminally involved women often are less culpable and inflict less harm and/or damage than male offenders. Moreover, the stable difference between the female share at arrest and at prosecution indicates that whatever social forces are impacting case processing, they are doing so fairly uniformly for both women and men. Unfortunately, sex-specific arrest data was not uniformly available for the United Kingdom so no comparison is possible (but see figure 4, which shows the female percent of assault offenders, prosecutions, and imprisonments for the United
Kingdom in 1994, 1997, and 2003); likewise, the United States did not regularly submit sex-specific prosecution data.

Additional data on imprisonment (see figure 3, panel C), the next stage of the criminal justice system, demonstrate the stability of the gender gap in the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Finland—the countries for which data are available. The female share of imprisonment in each of the three countries remained close to 5 percent over the past two decades. In the United Kingdom, the difference between this very stable female share of imprisonment and the previously discussed 10 percent increase in the female percent of prosecutions suggests net-widening social control policies that increasingly focus on more minor forms of offending that do not result in incarceration and that women have always been more likely to commit.

I examine the changing prominence of arrests for assault as a percent of all arrests because offense-specific arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment data are not available by sex. In Sweden and Finland, between 1990 and 2006, assaults made up a steady 4–6 percent of all offenses. In the United Kingdom, assaults also made up about 5 percent of offenses for most of the 1990s. In 1997 arrests for assault in the United Kingdom became an increasing portion of all arrests, and by 2006 arrests for assault in the UK had increased to almost 14 percent of all offenses (see figure 3, panel D). The female share of prosecutions also began to rise in the UK in 1997 (see figure 3, panel B). These data together support an assessment that social control policies on minor crimes and violent behavior in the United Kingdom are a driving force in the rise in prosecutions of women.

To summarize, case flow data provided by the United Nations World Survey on Crime Trends and Criminal Justice Systems show no remarkable changes in female offending in the Scandinavian countries. There was no sizeable change in the gender gap at any stage of the criminal justice system from arrest to prosecution to imprisonment. However, as documented in prior research, the United States exhibited growth in the female share of arrests, and the United Kingdom displayed growth in the female share of prosecutions since 1997. No corresponding growth in female imprisonment occurred in the United Kingdom, supporting a policy change explanation rather than actual change in female criminal behavior. Policies that deal with violent behavior and related law enforcement practices in the United States and United Kingdom
may bear examining because the number of assaults handled by police grew exponentially as a portion of all offenses.

The *European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics* offers more direct evidence on assault trends and the gender gap, albeit for a more limited time frame and set of countries. This source is likely to provide more accurate measures of the gender gap because the sponsoring agency takes a number of data quality-control measures. The sex-specific assault data across all case-processing stages available for the United Kingdom, Finland, and Sweden for the years 1995, 1999, and 2003 generally confirm findings from the *United Nations World Survey on Crime Trends and Criminal Justice Systems* on all offenses.

**Figure 4.** Case flow of female percent of assault offenders, convictions, and imprisonments, 1995, 1999, and 2003

Panel A: United Kingdom
Panel B: Finland

Panel C: Sweden

The female percent of assault offenders in the United Kingdom increased by 5 percent between 1995 and 1999 to 17 percent but was level in 2003 (figure 4, panel A). Neither Finland nor Sweden showed any marked gain in assault arrests for women—no more than 3 percent over the nine-year span. Norway’s limited data for 1995 and 1999 (not shown) depicted no gain—a 3 percent decline from 9 percent in 1995. Looking across the United Kingdom, Finland, and Sweden (panels A, B, and C), the female percent of assault offenders is comparable in 1995 (12 percent in the United Kingdom, 10 percent in Finland, and 9 percent in Sweden) but substantially higher in the UK than in Finland or Sweden in 1999 and 2003 (16–17 percent as compared to 9–12 percent). The difference is as large as 8 percent (between the United Kingdom and Sweden in 1999). This would suggest that there is some social circumstance peculiar to the United Kingdom (and perhaps shared with the United States) that can account for the rising female share of assault arrests.

The gender gap trend in assault convictions in the United Kingdom is toward increased female representation. Between 1995 and 1999, the female share of assault convictions increased by 3 percent, a lesser increase than the 5 percent rise in the female share of arrests. This pattern suggests the gender-specific consequences of the increased use of arrest for minor violence spilling over to the conviction stage, but many less serious female cases are filtered out of the system post-arrest. If female aggressive behavior were really on the rise, the increase in female representation should be similar across all stages of the criminal justice system. Therefore, it is notable that the female share of imprisonment for assault in the United Kingdom did not change much between 1999 and 2003 (a 2 percent decline). Unfortunately, key 1995 sex-specific imprisonment data are not available.

In Scandinavia, the gender gap in assault convictions remained fairly stable—11 percent in Finland in 1999 and 2003; 9 percent in Sweden in 1995 and 1999, and 12 percent in 2003. Moreover, the female share of convictions closely matched the female share of offenders.

Results provided by the empirically sound *European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics* are strongly similar to trends depicted in the data from the *United Nations World Survey on Crime Trends and Criminal Justice Systems*. In no source and at no stage of case processing do any
of the Scandinavian countries show sustained or sizeable increases in female representation. The United Kingdom appears to be anomalous with regard to its substantial rise in the female share of assault offenders and marginal increase in the female share of prosecutions and convictions. Evidence in support of the policy change hypothesis, UK case flow data indicate that increased female involvement in assault was concentrated early at the arrest stage, but also spilled over to the conviction stage. As female representation increased, however, more female than male cases were filtered out of the criminal justice process so that the gender gap narrowed at conviction compared to arrest and not at all by imprisonment.

Discussion and Conclusion
These theoretical hypotheses and empirical analyses addressed the question of whether the female share of involvement in violence is increasing, and if so, where and why. As one step toward evaluating these broad questions, I examined time series criminal case processing data beginning in 1985 from a variety of sources on two sets of nations; three English-speaking and three Scandinavian countries. It is substantively important to identify where, when, and why there are disproportionate increases in female violence, but this analysis also bears on an important theoretical debate over whether girls’ and women’s lives are changing in ways that elevate their violence (the behavior change hypothesis) versus the social constructionist perspective that any increases in girls’ and women’s violence is due to changing social control mechanisms that, sometimes inadvertently, target female offending patterns (the policy change hypothesis).

First, evidence from the analyses here supports the policy change hypothesis over the behavior change hypothesis—on balance, girls and women are not any more violent today than in the past. In all six countries, the female share of homicide declined or did not change. I evaluate this as strong evidence against the behavior change hypothesis because homicide is among the most reliably reported and measured forms of violent behavior. The female share of imprisonment, another accurate marker of serious offending, also did not increase in any of the six nations. In only the United States and the United Kingdom, the female share of arrests increased and the female
share of convictions/prosecutions increased less. As anticipated by Steffensmeier et al., net-widening social control policies more substantially affected women, particularly at earlier stages of the criminal justice system.⁴⁶

To more stringently evaluate these competing hypotheses, future studies may take several approaches. Unofficial crime data, such as victim reports of offenders, offer an important point in data triangulation efforts to get a fuller and more accurate picture of change because these estimates do not rely on victim-reporting to police or police (in)action. Such data already are available for some nations (e.g., the United States and the United Kingdom); for other nations, systematic repeated cross-national victimization data are becoming available. As a different tack, analysts should use more direct measures to test the extent to which changes in economic opportunities, economic marginalization, or mechanisms of formal social control are related to female and male trends in offending. Steffensmeier and Streifel’s time series analysis evaluating property crime trends against predictors such as female economic marginalization, liberation, and changes in policing offer a model to replicate for the more recent female “violent crime wave” of the mid- to late 1990s.⁴⁷

Second, this analysis here demonstrates that the United States and the United Kingdom are distinct when compared to Canada and the Scandinavian countries. It is only in the United States and the United Kingdom where female representation in crime and violent offending increased disproportionately at the earlier stages of the criminal justice process. Qualitative-comparative analyses of violence policies in the United States and the United Kingdom seem warranted given the shared anomalous findings identified here. It would be instructive to include Canada in any policy analysis so as not to sample on the dependent variable of female increases. Such an analysis would begin to get at shared characteristics of social control policies that disproportionately affect female arrest trends. Assault policies are a fertile area to explore because present and past analyses suggest assault trends are a driving force behind female arrest increases. There is also value in continuing to systematically examine and compare various sets of countries to continue the task of evaluating where female involvement in violence may be increasing. The research presented here provides a starting point but assesses only a limited and select group of
countries. Such aims are more possible than even several years ago because of the increasing availability of data.

A fundamental concern is what underlies the net-widening trend that seems to have caused the official increase in the female share of violent offending. In both the United States and the United Kingdom, a new culture of crime control and criminal justice policy took hold in the mid-1990s that emphasized preventive punishment. Several factors contributed to the growing dominance of punishment strategies that targeted low-level aggression and violence. Gaining prominence in academia and the crime prevention/security sector, developmental perspectives emphasize early and proactive intervention as a primary strategy for preventing escalation of minor conduct violations into more troublesome antisocial behavior. A foundation of social control efforts, this perspective tends to (1) blur distinctions between delinquency and antisocial behavior; (2) confound differing forms of aggression and verbal intimidation as manifesting interpersonal violence; and (3) elevate interpersonal violence (defined broadly) as a high-profile social problem.

Changes in epistemology coincided with changes in law enforcement toward situational crime prevention, targeting minor forms of crime as a strategy for controlling serious criminality, essentially lowering the threshold of law enforcement and “charging up” low-level crime. Heightened citizen concern about personal safety generated both more proactive reporting and pro-arrest policies by police. Likewise, citizen-advocacy groups called attention to the social problem of aggression and advocated early, often formal (police), intervention. Similarly, stakeholders or advocacy groups with interests in female violence have emerged to aid, repress, punish, rehabilitate, safeguard, or in other ways deal with both victims and offenders. These private and public agencies and industries sometimes use official data as advocacy statistics to advance professional interests (e.g., publications, grants, jobs, media share) in support of their agency’s agenda. The media’s eagerness in reporting high-profile cases of female violence buttress misinterpretations of official data and spread conceptions of purported shifts in female violence. Last, political campaigns routinely endorse policy changes toward greater punitiveness and social control as a get-elected strategy. Public policies and law enforcement practices are shaped in response to these concerns.
Should these risk management and preventive punishment trends continue or spread to other countries, they will result in arresting women in proportionately larger numbers than would be expected based on the typical sex ratio in violent offending. Future female arrest trends for violence are likely to depend less on what women do than on whether net widening defines public policies. However, before firm conclusions are drawn regarding the mechanisms underlying increased female-to-male involvement in the criminal justice system, more research is needed.

Researchers should be cautious in drawing conclusions from comparative cross-national analyses, including those presented here. Crime recording techniques and abilities, definitions of crime and violence, gender norms and guidelines, and other structural and cultural differences between nations mean that even “standard” measures of offenses differ in unknowable ways. Cross-national crime measures also differ in the accuracy of estimates and nature and extent of missing data, making it complicated to assess “real” change versus data noise or error in the year-to-year point estimates. To more rigorously assess change, sophisticated missing data techniques and time series methods could be applied to these data series once more data points are available. Despite these limitations, these analyses here do provide important and reliable findings.

To summarize, female violence is neither increasing nor changing in nature to be more serious. No increase was identified in the female share of homicide or the relative proportion of women being imprisoned. No female arrest or prosecution increases occurred in Canada or the three Scandinavian countries. Rather it is likely that shifts in social control practices in select countries—the United States and the United Kingdom—have caused an increase in the rate of arrests for women.

Notes
Acknowledgements: Thank you to Erin Glaze for her research assistance compiling the data.


16. Miller, *Victims as Offenders*. 


37. Baxter and Kane, “Dependence and Independence.”

38. I thank Suzi Agha for these data.

39. These data include both those who were arrested as well as suspects, the latter of which have had some kind of formal contact with the police such as being warned, officially contacted, etc., but not arrested.


42. See O’Brien, “Measuring the Convergence/Divergence of ‘Serious Crime.’”


44. Although the assault-to-homicide ratio would be preferable, homicide data were not reported consistently for this group of countries.


49. Ibid., 169.

50. Ibid.