

'At Large': Women's lives and offending in Victorian London and Liverpool. By Lucy Williams, University of Liverpool.

My doctoral research focuses on serious female offenders living in Liverpool and London during the nineteenth century. In contrast to much existing historical research on women and crime, the interest of my work is not solely on the offences women committed, nor their offending patterns; but instead on their lives, experiences, and identities. My research moves away from classic histories of female offenders in England as shoplifters, prostitutes, and child-killers, and considers the wider involvement of women in crimes of theft and violence in Victorian cities. The intention of this work is to recognise that, although convicted of a range of crimes, the female offenders of Victorian England were also family members, friends and workers. They were individual people with hopes, ambitions and plans. They were active agents in their own lives, their own offences, and their own stories.

My research considers three central areas relating to the 'who, what, and why?' of female offending. Firstly I explore the types of crimes that women most often undertook, what the common patterns of female serious offending were at this time, as well as investigating at what stages of the life-cycle women were most vulnerable to offending. Secondly I investigate the collective identities of female offenders. My research asks - what kinds of women were likely to become serious offenders, and why? Finally my research explores how offending interplayed with a range of other experiences in women's lives – for example employment, relationships and motherhood, and typical living conditions.

In order to answer these questions, I have used extensive archival and digital research (Home Office and Prison Commission: Licences of parole for female convicts, *19th Century Newspapers Online*, census returns of England and Wales 1841-1911, select parish records). I have extensively profiled the lives, experiences, and offences of one hundred serious offenders from two of the major cities in Victorian England. My methodology relies upon using a cross-record (or 'Record Linkage') approach to trace groups of individual offenders over long periods of time, constructing detailed narratives of their movements and life events – be that family background, employment history, or residential and health data. The life narratives I have constructed have been analysed, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to produce detailed life histories of individual offenders but also to contextualise them within the common factors and experiences present in the lives of all of those profiled. My approach uses a mix of methodologies from History and Criminology, and draws partly from the practice of both biography and prosopography, alongside more traditional historical methods.

My study has produced a number of fascinating conclusions about the lives of female offenders and the possible causes of their offending. The findings demonstrate that female offences were diverse, and patterns of offending were heavily influenced by local, environmental, and personal factors. Analysis of women's experiences shows that limited opportunities for employment, difficult living conditions, and poor prospects for social mobility and stability all impacted upon the probability of offending, and whether that offending was property or violent crime. My research also shows that women who were part of the lowest sections of the working class, members of an ethnic minority, the oldest female child in their families, and unmarried, were most likely to become serious female offenders. Local differences in employment opportunities, housing patterns, and policing practices could all impact upon the kind of crimes undertaken by women, the period of the life-cycle in which offending was most likely to begin, the length of offending careers, and the number of convictions women gained. Yet I found the biggest contribution to serious female offending was made by experiences which transcended both location and environment, namely the issues of poverty, and social and economic exclusion.