Chapter two.

offender profiling and linking crime.

The term ‘offender profiling’ is one with which most of us are familiar. Its recent appearances in the media have certainly raised the profile of criminal psychology and a number of students are keen to work in this area. Unfortunately, the media portrayal of offender profiling has often been far from accurate. As a result of its general popularity, much has been written on this topic and a comprehensive review of the literature is beyond the scope of this chapter: rather we aim to give you a more accurate introduction to the topic of offender profiling. It will also introduce you to the equally fascinating but relatively unpublicized practice of linking crimes, which has at times been considered a type of offender profiling. However, the aims of the two processes are quite different and therefore they are discussed separately within this chapter.

offender profiling.

Offender profiling is the inferring of an offender’s characteristics from his or her crime scene behaviour. For example, a profiler might try to infer a criminal’s age, gender or employment history from the way he or she has behaved during a crime. This practice has been referred to by other names including criminal profiling, psychological profiling and specific profile analysis. Offender profiling is typically used with crimes where the offender’s identity is unknown and with serious types of crime, such as murder or rape. Profilers are also likely to work on crime series, which are collections of crimes that are thought to have been committed by the same offender.

The different types of offender profiling can be broken down broadly into two types: geographical profiling and the profiling of an offender’s personal characteristics. The latter is what people most commonly associate with the term offender profiling.

The types of tasks that offender profilers might be asked to complete depend on the type of profiler they are. A geographical profiler could be asked to identify the likely location of an offender’s home from the geography of his or her known offences. An offender profiler might be asked to construct a profile of an unknown offender giving details of his or her likely characteristics as inferred from the offender’s behaviour at the crime scene. When an offender is apprehended the profiler might also be asked to advise the police on the way that particular suspects should be interviewed. As you can see, offender profiling is therefore an umbrella term for a number of different practices.

Having identified what offender profiling is, we should address the question ‘Who are offender profilers?’ In 1995, Gary Copson investigated this issue and found that the majority of profilers in Britain were typically academic or criminal psychologists. Psychiatrists, police officers and police civilian staff were also represented within his sample of offender profilers: clearly offender profilers are themselves a varied group of people.

It may come as a surprise to learn that offender profiling is rarely a full-time occupation. While the media tend to portray offender profiling as a job in itself, very few individuals, within the United Kingdom at least, conduct offender profiling full-time. Most offender profilers are called in as consultants: the role is not as widely practised as the media portray. For example, Copson’s study found only seventy-five instances of offender profilers giving advice in 1994, and this was the highest number recorded in one year for the time span of his study.

A number of different materials can be used by an offender profiler in constructing a profile or in geographically profiling an offender’s likely home. One of the most important sources of information for constructing a profile would be the victims’ or witnesses’ accounts of the crime. In some types of crime it is possible that a victim’s account may not be available, for example in the case of murder. In such cases, an offender profiler might instead have to rely on post-mortem reports, sketches of the crime scene and accounts from others about the victim. Regardless of the documentation used in constructing the profile, an offender profiler has a lot of information to absorb and process when trying to profile the offenders or their location.

geographical profiling.

Geographical profiling is typically used to identify the likely area of an offender’s residence from the location of the crime. Such an approach can be very useful in narrowing down a pool of suspects or enabling the police to prioritize an area for investigation or DNA sampling.

Geographical profiling has its history in environmental criminology. The aim of environmental criminologists was to identify areas where criminals were likely to offend from the locations of the offenders’ residences: the aim of geographical profiling is the reverse. Using the locations of an offender’s crimes as his or her starting point, the geographical profiler tries to predict the area in which the offender lives.

Although the aims of the two disciplines are different, they are based on the same theories. One of these is the principle of distance decay. This is based on the notion that when people are looking for something, they will only travel as far as they have to: as the distance between them and their target object increases, they are therefore less likely to travel to obtain it. Applying this to crime, if offenders have to choose between two different targets, if all other factors are equal, they will choose the one that is geographically closer to them.

Another criminological principle that is used in geographical profiling is the rational choice theory which predicts that offenders will often engage in a cost–benefit analysis when deciding where to offend. When deciding whether to travel to obtain a target object, the criminals will weigh up the costs (e.g. the effort of travel), with the benefits (e.g. how much they desire the object). A commercial robber might therefore be prepared to travel further to commit a robbery with higher financial rewards. A rapist whose sexual fantasies relate to a particular type of victim might be prepared to travel further to seek out such a victim.

Within geographical profiling there is also the idea of a buffer zone which relates to both of the above principles. This is a zone located around an offender’s home where he or she will not offend because, while the effort of travel is minimal, the likelihood of being recognized and therefore apprehended is higher. The benefits of minimal travel are therefore outweighed by the potential of being caught.

Routine Activities Theory and Pattern Theory are also relevant to geographical profiling. These suggest that criminals will offend in an area with which they are familiar. In other words, while criminals are going about their daily life, they will notice potential targets. A burglar might therefore notice that a family are going on holiday and target this house in their absence. The area with which criminals are familiar and which surrounds their residence has been called the ‘home range’, while the area in which they commit crimes has been called the ‘criminal range’.

These theories also relate to the idea in geographical profiling that offenders have a cognitive or mental map of their (familiar) geographical areas. Like offenders, we also have mental maps of the areas with which we are familiar. The distances between places in our cognitive maps are unlikely to reflect real distances: instead perceived distance plays an important role. For example, if we are familiar with a place that is easy to get to because of good transport links, we tend to perceive it as closer than it actually is. Offenders are no different. For example, the transport available to burglars has been found to affect the distance they travelled to commit burglaries. Those with cars tended to travel further than those who were on foot. By travelling in a car, the journey takes less time and thus the distance to a property seems less.

These theories have led to the development in criminal psychology of geographical profiling principles and definitions of types (i.e. typologies) of offenders. Two researchers have been largely responsible for these developments: Dr Kim Rossmo and Professor David Canter. Both have developed typologies of offenders which have some similarities. Rather than describing these in detail, it suffices to say that a distinction exists within both sets of typologies between two types of offender that affects the likely success of geographical profiling.

A distinction is drawn between offenders termed marauders (or hunters) and commuters (or poachers). The marauders are hypothesized to move outwards from their residence to offend. Each time they go out to offend, the direction in which they travel can change and these changes in direction can reflect where the offenders have previously committed crimes. Rather than return to the same area, which could be risky, the offenders might travel outwards in a different direction. The marauder’s home range and criminal range therefore overlap.

In contrast to marauders, commuters travel away from their home to a specific area where they offend. This could be because the commuters are in search of a particular type of victim/ target that cannot be obtained within their home range, and their criminal range is therefore unlikely to overlap with their home range. Research with stranger rapists (rapists that attack victims previously unknown to them) and serial arsonists has confirmed that for these types of criminals, the marauder pattern of offending is more common, whereas the pattern for serial burglars is less clear. However, research has suggested that offenders may change their geographical pattern of offending, sometimes behaving as marauders and at other times behaving as commuters. One study examined a serial rapist who offended in Italy over a considerable number of years and it revealed that the offender sometimes behaved as a marauder but at other times as a commuter. Clearly it would be unwise to assume that offenders fit one typology or another.

Geographical profiling principles have been developed in England for the marauder type of offender by Professor David Canter and colleagues. These are based on the Circle Theory of Environmental Range which predicts that all things being equal, the shape of an offender’s criminal and home range will be circular, with the home itself being located in the centre of the circle. When the home location is unknown, which is the case for geo- graphical profilers, its approximate location can be predicted by drawing a circle through the two most geographically distant offences. The offender’s home should therefore be located within the circle and also towards the centre of the circle. This is because the two most geographically distant offences will also be those furthest from the offender’s home. This model has been applied to serial rape, arson and burglary with some success.

As well as relying on statistical approaches for geographical profiling, geographical profilers also consider issues such as the offender’s likely motivation for the offences and the characteristics of the physical environment in which his or her offending takes place. Such factors could skew an offender’s journey to crime and therefore affect the appropriateness of statistical models.

The effectiveness of geographical profiling has not received a great deal of attention, though there are some reports regarding its accuracy. For example, between 1991 and 2001 Rossmo’s geographical profiling system, Rigel, was used in the investigation of 1,426 crimes. Its effectiveness was assessed by comparing the size of the total area over which the offences occurred to the (smaller) size of area beginning to be searched on the basis of the geographical profile. On average, the offender’s residence was correctly identified having searched approximately just the central five per cent of the offence area. Its effectiveness seemed to vary depending on the type of crime, with it being most effective for arson.