Tackling prolific offenders through crime linkage

Enhancing police and law enforcement responses to prolific serial offenders
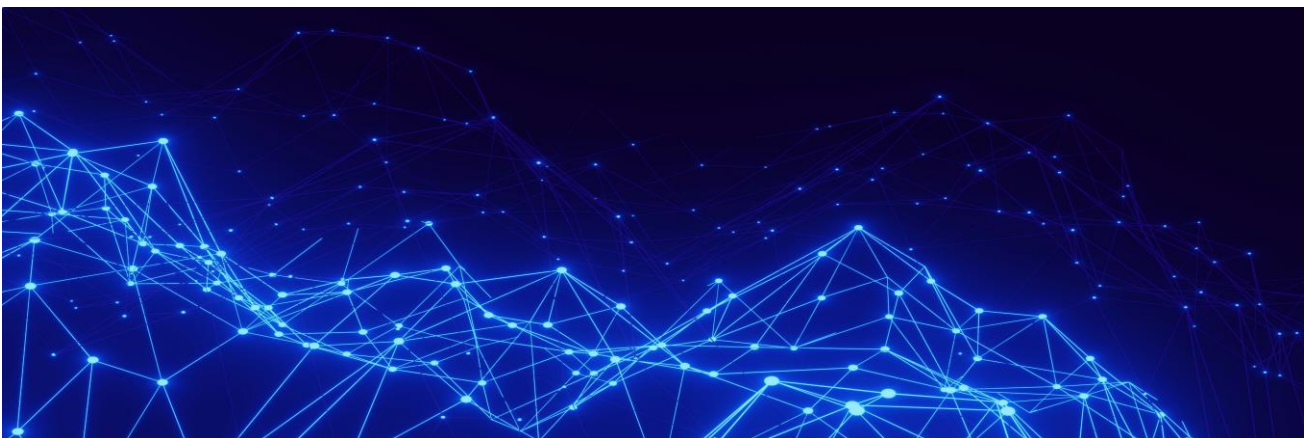

Key Policy Recommendation

Embed crime linkage into police and law enforcement responses to prolific serial offenders through a multi-stage approach.

The impact of crime linkage

Crime linkage is the decision that two or more crimes are the work of the same individual. Enhancing the capacity of law enforcement to conduct crime linkage:

- Provides opportunities to **increase** the **detection and prosecution** of prolific serial offenders.

- Brings **significant financial benefits** to society, reducing the £18 billion annual cost of reoffending in the UK.

- **Enhances public confidence** in policing, which has declined by 18% in less than 5 years.

- Delivers **greater access to justice for victims** and **positive impacts for suspect identification** and the number of crimes being brought to trial.

- Facilitates **more efficient and cost-effective methods of policing**.

The above is essential because only **6% of crimes** reported to the police **result in a charge or summons** and **40% of investigations** are **closed without a suspect being identified**.

The case for crime linkage

- The **majority of crime is committed by a minority of prolific serial offenders**, with over 50% of crime committed by just 5-10% of offenders.
- These prolific serial offenders impose significant financial and human costs on society.

Repeat offending costs the UK £18.1 billion every year (Ministry of Justice data, 2019).

- Policing and criminal justice responses are, however, **struggling to tackle the problem:**
- 40% of adults with 11+ previous convictions reoffend within one year.
- 40% of investigations are closed without a suspect being identified.

94% of crimes reported to the police do not result in a charge or summons (Home Office data, 2023).

Tackling serial offending is, therefore, a priority for police and law enforcement.

Tackling serial offending relies on being able to identify crime series. This is called crime linkage – the decision that two or more crimes are the work of the same individual.

Many approaches to crime linkage exist, but **police often need to rely on offender crime scene behaviour to link crimes due to an absence of DNA at crime scenes**.

Behavioural crime linkage is essential in the fight to address serial offending and to protect the public from the disproportionate harm they inflict on society.

Evidence base

More than 20 years of research evidence supports the use of behavioural crime linkage by police and law enforcement agencies.

This body of evidence **spans multiple crime types**, from violent and sexual offences to property-oriented crimes, such as arson, robbery, burglary, and vehicle crime.

The research is international in nature, with **evidence to support behavioural crime linkage demonstrated in a wide range of countries**, including the UK, mainland Europe, South Africa, US, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand.

Ongoing collaborative research between the National Crime Agency, University of Birmingham, University of Leicester, and Imperial College London is **building prototype crime linkage software to enhance the identification of serial sexual offenders nationally** in the UK.

Thus far, this research has:
- Developed and tested algorithms which demonstrate significant potential to support human analysts.
- Built and evaluated an approach to displaying algorithmic findings to human analysts.
- Identified what the prototype needs to do to enhance behavioural crime linkage and how it can be integrated into existing decision-making processes.

95 of the top 100 crime pairs prioritised by the crime linkage algorithm were linked, which is a high level of accuracy.

Implementation

1. Complete the design, implementation and evaluation of crime linkage prototype software for sexual offences in the UK

Once built, the prototype will be utilised by the National Crime Agency and its ability to support the identification of serial sexual offenders nationally in the UK evaluated.

We **anticipate that the prototype will enable linked sexual offences to be identified more quickly, efficiently and accurately than currently possible**, which will maximise opportunities to detect and prosecute serial sexual offenders at the earliest opportunity.

2. Roll the prototype out internationally

Serial sexual offenders impose significant harm on societies all round the world, not just the UK.

We will seek funding to **work with international law enforcement agencies to adapt and implement the prototype in their jurisdictions.**

That way, we can maximise the impact of our work on protecting the public from sexual violence, and UK law enforcement can become a leader in this space.

3. Extend the prototype to other crime types

Serial offenders are diverse in the crimes they commit, with many offenders committing a range of violent, sexual and property-oriented crimes.

It is vital we seek funding to **adapt our prototype to support behavioural crime linkage beyond sexual offences** (e.g., burglary, robbery and vehicle crime).

4. Enhance the collection and storage of crime scene information

Detailed, robust crime scene information is essential for effective policing, and behavioural crime linkage research has amassed a wealth of expertise that can be used to improve:

(i) how the police collect crime scene information in a way that minimises time/cost but maximises the value of what is collected; and

(ii) how this information is stored in a way that maximises its investigative value.

5. Raise awareness of behavioural crime linkage and its accuracy

Within policing, there is a chronic lack of knowledge, understanding and training regarding behavioural crime linkage.

Given the potential for crime linkage to support **the timely and cost-effective detection/prosecution of prolific serial offenders**, it is vital that this lack of knowledge and skills is addressed.

Behavioural crime linkage research has produced an extensive evidence base that can be used to raise awareness and to design evidence-based training that enhances the analytical capacity of law enforcement. Funding to support this work is needed.

www.le.ac.uk/research/institutes/policy

References

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