

Finding the missing link

Using offender behaviour to find links between crimes has never been more important. Kari Davies explains



Linking offences together is often a viable way of assisting in the solving of crimes, whereby evidence and information from several crime scenes may be collated, with the possibility of generating new investigative leads. While popular entertainment would have us believe that physical evidence is available in the majority of offences, fingerprints, DNA, and other forensic material used to link offences together is often unavailable. The question is, then, whether other methods can be used to assist in linking crimes, which may in turn assist in the swifter apprehension, and appropriate sentencing of offenders.

Linking offences using offender behaviour – or crime linkage – may be one such method. In essence, this involves searching for patterns of behaviours exhibited by an offender at a crime scene, which may lead us to believe that the crimes were committed by the same person. Crime linkage,

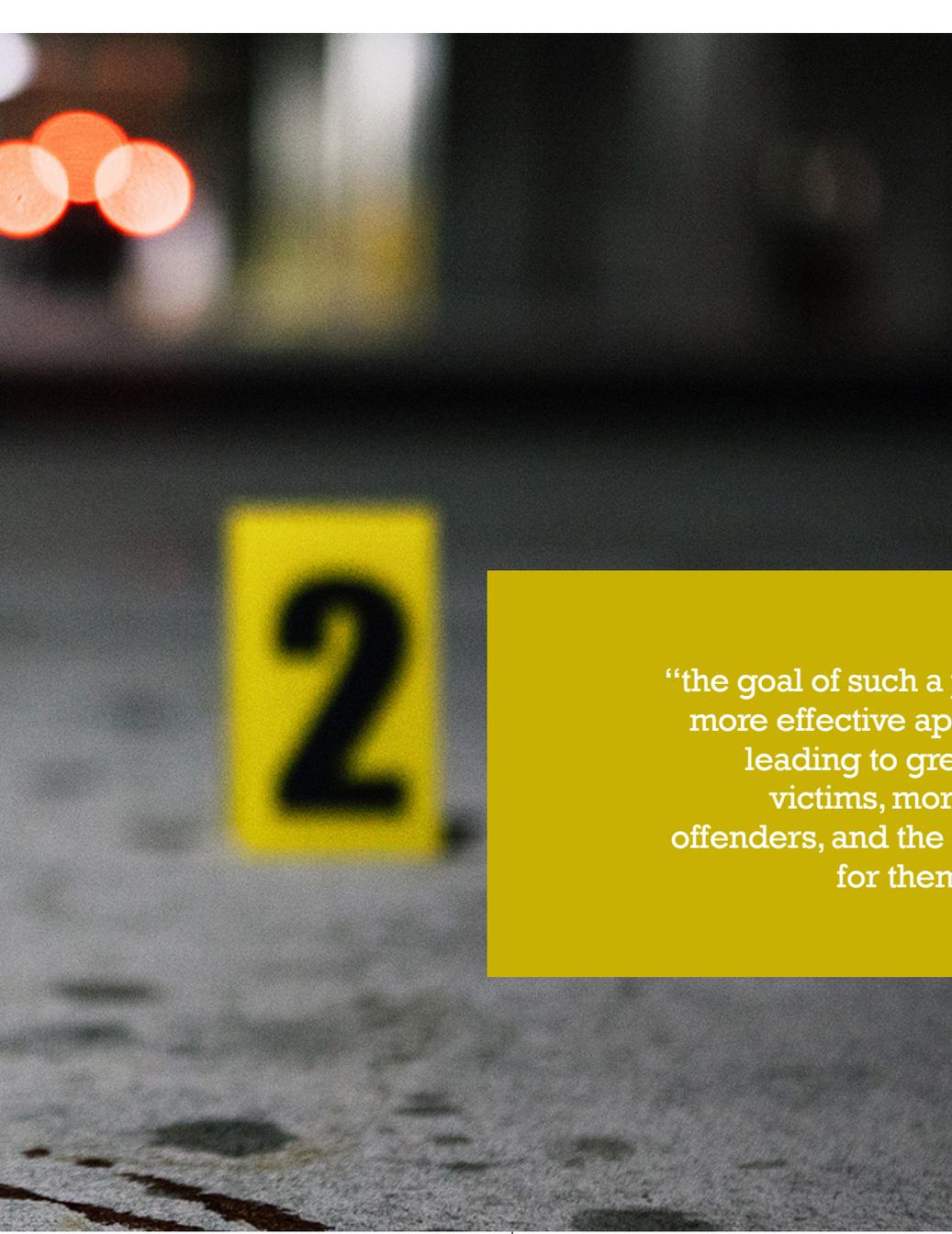


therefore, relies on the premises both of offenders being behaviourally consistent enough that such a pattern exists, and that their behaviour is distinctive enough from other offenders' behaviour that we might be able to differentiate between different behavioural patterns.

The academic research in this area has made substantial inroads into testing the validity of these premises. Support has generally been found for the notions of behavioural consistency and distinctiveness, with some behaviours adhering to the principle of consistency more than others. The same is true of offenders themselves; some offenders seem to be more behaviourally consistent than others, although why this is so

warrants further consideration. It should also be noted here that while academic research has largely used samples of stranger offences with which to test these premises, there may also be scope for linking stranger offences to offences where the perpetrator is known to the victim, although this concept has, to date, received little attention. This is an important point, however, given how





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many offenders are known to commit offences against different types of victims (known as crossover offenders).

What has yet to be studied in any detail is how crime linkage works in practice. Some practitioners have written about their approach to conducting crime linkage, and the different methods they employ in order to make decisions about whether crimes are linked or

not. The practice of crime linkage is worthy of attention in its own right because of the myriad of additional considerations that become relevant during this process. Considering the specific decision-making processes that law enforcement use to make linkage judgments, for example, is of interest, particularly considering the effect on linkage efficacy that each decision may have.

Research at the University of Birmingham has started to map the process of one particular type of crime linkage called comparative case analysis, where an index offence or series is compared to a large database of crimes in order to assess whether any potential links can be found. This research has identified aspects

of offenders’ behaviour considered key to the linkage process, as well as other aspects of crime linkage that require further study. How the use of computerised tools like the Violent Crime Analysis System (ViCLAS) can assist with the process of finding links, for instance, and the conditions required for such systems to operate effectively, is another research question currently under study at the University of Birmingham.

While a relatively new topic in the field of forensic psychology, crime linkage is a fast-expanding body of research. Ultimately, the goal of such a process is to assist in the more effective apprehension of offenders, leading to greater access to justice for victims, more effective sentencing of offenders, and the reduction in opportunity for them to continue to offend. **GR**

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