

Doing Police Research: Approaches & Challenges Programme

29 April 2025

Room S0.13, Social Sciences Building, University of Warwick, CV4 7AL

09.30-09.50	COFFEE
09.50-10.00	Welcome Jackie Hodgson & Kim Wade. COPR Directors
10.00-11.30	<p>A. Methods of researching policing Chair: Aura Bamber (School of Law, Warwick)</p> <p>Impact evaluation of Operation Divan (Knife crime intervention) Illin Gani – University of Birmingham</p> <p>Utilising Domestic Homicide Reviews to prevent Adult Family Domestic Homicide Kelly Bracewell – UCLAN</p> <p>Adversity, Trauma, and Resilience during Childhood Experiences Sat Kaur Chandan – University of Leeds</p>
11.30-11.45	COFFEE
11.45-1.15	<p>B. Researching child sexual abuse & exploitation Chair: Dr Tim Mullett (WBS, Warwick)</p> <p>A discourse analytic approach to offender prioritisation and infiltration in child sexual exploitation and abuse communities Amy Booth – Aston University</p> <p>Linguistic Trust Development in Online Child Sexual Abuse: an interdisciplinary approach to enhancing safeguarding and policing practices Annina Y Van Riper – University of Birmingham</p> <p>What categories of data will be processed? Navigating data protection and security in ethnographic work on policing Hannah Marshall – University of Warwick</p>
1.15-2.00	LUNCH
2.00-3.00	<p>C. Researching police malpractice Chair: Dr Rachel Lewis (Sociology, Warwick)</p> <p>Internal sexual harassment among police personnel: Insights from a Birmingham, UK cross-sectional survey Bilal Magsi – BCU</p> <p>Police violence: Understanding individual differences in violent attitudes and behaviour Rebecca Plimmer – University of Warwick</p>

3:00-4:00	<p>D. Researching Procedural Justice Chair: Prof Kim Wade (Psychology, Warwick)</p> <p>Improving Warwickshire Police Victim Satisfaction Mariam Abdelnabi – University of Warwick</p> <p>Navigating the challenges of using BWVs to conduct social systematic observations in stop and search research Sharda Murria – BCU</p>
4.00-4.15	<p>COFFEE & CAKE</p>
4.15-5:15	<p>E. Technology & Natural Language Processing Chair: Dr Hannah Marshall (Sociology, Warwick)</p> <p>A Survey Exploring Crime Analysts' Use of NLP and Text Analytics Darren Cook – City St George, University of London</p> <p>Using an AI-powered Natural Language Processing system in VWAG investigations Chen Lyu – University of Warwick</p>
5.15	<p>Close and adjourn for drinks & networking for those wishing to stay</p>

Doing Police Research: Approaches & Challenges Abstracts

Session A. Methods of Researching Policing

Impact evaluation of Operation Divan (Knife crime intervention)

Illin Gani – PhD Student, University of Birmingham

The impact evaluation of Operation (Op) Divan employs a retrospective cohort design to assess its effectiveness in reducing knife carrying among young people. This study will compare outcomes between individuals who have participated in Op Divan within the North Yorkshire Police jurisdiction and a matched control group from Lincolnshire Police, where the intervention has not been implemented. The evaluation will analyse changes in knife carrying and offending rates, considering variations across demographic subgroups, including age, sex, socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Cox proportional hazards regression will be used to examine the time until an offence occurs, allowing us to assess whether the intervention delays or reduces the likelihood of reoffending over time while adjusting for key covariates such as age, sex, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. To strengthen the analysis, the study will apply statistical techniques such as propensity score matching and, where feasible, a difference-in-differences approach. Data collection will primarily rely on police records, with structured analytical frameworks ensuring robustness in data handling and interpretation. The evaluation will produce a practitioner-focused report and a technical annex, offering actionable insights for policymakers and law enforcement agencies. By integrating rigorous quantitative analysis, this study aims to inform future decisions regarding the scalability and refinement of early intervention initiatives designed to deter young people from carrying weapons. If feasible, early findings from the evaluation will be presented at the symposium.

Utilising Domestic Homicide Reviews to prevent Adult Family Domestic Homicide

Kelly Bracewell – Research Fellow, UCLAN

This presentation reports on a thematic document analysis of 66 Adult Family Homicide (AFH) Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs) in England and Wales collected 2016-2019. Intimate partner homicides are excluded. Using documentary analysis, we triangulated the quantitative data from the AFV DHRs to contextualise the qualitative data. Our analysis identified five key intersecting issues: mental health and substance/alcohol misuse, a history of criminal behaviour, childhood trauma, financial issues and the dynamics of care. Perpetrators' involvement with the criminal justice system was a prominent theme. Police involvement was noted regarding 50 out of 66 (75.8%) perpetrators which indicates that they have a key role to play in identifying risks of homicide. Case examples will be used to illustrate police involvement and highlight areas of good practice, areas for development and learning, and an analysis of the recommendations. DHR recommendations for agencies and local authorities (including the police) surrounded improved training, professional curiosity, multi-agency working, risk assessment and information sharing. DHRs reinforced the need for a greater co-ordination between those supporting and the perpetrator and those responsible for assessing support for the victim. This presentation highlights that risk and dynamics relating to AFH are complex and probation officers must consider social-structural as well as relational-contextual factors influencing violence.

Adversity, Trauma, and Resilience during Childhood Experiences

Sat Kaur Chandan – PhD Student, University of Leeds

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are formative experiences that significantly shape an individual's development. They can develop into vulnerabilities, contributing to violence, victimisation, perpetration, and long-term health challenges. These experiences can be further compounded by interactions with the police and Criminal Justice System (CJS), introducing additional challenges of adversity and trauma. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of young people aged 18-25 in West Yorkshire to better understand how ACEs, when combined with police and CJS encounters, influence their life trajectories. Through creative storytelling techniques and task-based methods, including advice forum vignettes and life road mapping activities, the study provides a platform for young people to articulate their experiences. The research seeks to understand how these interactions influence their vulnerabilities, while examining the role of resilience in shaping life outcomes. Complementary interviews with practitioners will offer a broader perspective on the challenges young people face and the support available. This presentation will provide an initial overview of the research design and methodologies to address the following questions: What ACEs have young people faced, and how do these experiences shape life trajectories? What are the compounding effects of interactions with the police and CJS on young people who have experienced adversity and trauma? What opportunities exist for early intervention, safeguarding, and resilience-building to improve outcomes for these young people? By adopting a trauma-informed approach, this research addresses the interventions, interdisciplinary approaches, and policies that support those affected by childhood adversity and trauma. This presentation also invites discussion on policing and CJS in the context of ACEs.

Session B. Researching Child Sexual Abuse & Exploitation

A discourse analytic approach to offender prioritisation and infiltration in child sexual exploitation and abuse communities

Amy Booth – Postdoctoral Fellow, Aston University

The ubiquity of the internet has allowed more individuals than ever to engage in child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) and with the online communities which surround it. The large scale of offending makes CSEA a particular challenge for law enforcement agencies working with limited resources. Tackling online CSEA networks often involves two primary goals: first, the prioritisation of powerful community members, who may pose the greatest risk of harm to children; and second, the infiltration of communities by undercover officers posing as community members. This research aims to aid law enforcement in both of these goals by using a discourse analytic approach to explore users' first ever posts in a dark web CSEA forum community. By analysing posts from three types of forum member—ranging from the shortest-term users through to the longest-term, most influential users—I am able to identify, for the first time, discursive patterns which may be used to identify higher-risk users from the beginning of their forum posting career. In doing so, I also explore how forum members discursively construct and align themselves with a paedophile identity, valuable knowledge for undercover officers seeking to believably perform as legitimate members of this, “low trust” community (Grant & MacLeod, 2020). My analysis suggests that the three user types fall along a behavioural continuum, with users who will go on to have longer forum posting careers making higher-status claims of previous CSEA experience, and showing greater orientation to the online CSEA network as a true, affective community.

Linguistic Trust Development in Online Child Sexual Abuse: an interdisciplinary approach to enhancing safeguarding and policing practices

Annina Y Van Riper – PhD Student, University of Birmingham

Online child sexual abuse is a criminal practice that consists of two primary means of communication: networking with other offenders and grooming children. Though research into these domains is scarce, linguists have investigated these illicit interactions with the purpose of improving the delivery of justice. Chiang (2021), for example, analysed transcripts between an undercover officer and 25 suspected child sexual offenders; her work maps offender moves (e.g., sharing indecent material) in conjunction with their function (e.g., gauging the risk of interaction). Similarly, Lorenzo-Dus and Izura (2017) studied how compliments are used by groomers relative to the speed of online grooming. The results of these studies have been applied to police trainings (Grant & MacLeod, 2020) and improved safeguarding technologies for children online (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2024). Functionally, suspected child offenders share the procedural goal of gaining trust, be that from one another or children. Identifying how trust is manifest in online spaces of child sexual abuse is a crucial step in advancing safeguarding technologies and understanding how law enforcement officers can better maintain their cover in undercover operations. This paper will present an overview of research methods used to perform linguistic analyses of suspected child offenders. Additionally, it will propose a linguistic-based, trust-driven method for identifying pervasive discursive features of trust development. The proposed method will use real world data, qualitative linguistic methods, and a widely-accepted model of trust to demonstrate the strengths of an interdisciplinary when working with policing data.

What categories of data will be processed? Navigating data protection and security in ethnographic work on policing

Hannah Marshall – Assistant Professor, University of Warwick

Sat at the bank of desks designated for officers within the “Child Exploitation Unit”, I make some brief observational notes. Recently, I’ve been reflecting on the stark juxtaposition between the sadness of the cases dealt with here and the lively day-to-day atmosphere of the office, which is infused with pop music, running in-jokes, and good-natured teasing. This morning, during which I’ve observed a sergeant on a Teams call explain the circumstance of a violent assault, while officers across the room take a break to goad each other about hair transplants and “Is This The Way To Amarillo” blares from the radio, has been a good example. Although such observations are not unfamiliar in ethnographies of policing, which often highlight the intermingling of humour and tragedy in policework, that morning I began to wonder whether I’d managed to fully convey that this is what I meant by “observational data” during extensive discussions with the force’s data protection and security specialist. Drawing on a 6-month ethnography of police responses to child exploitation, this presentation will explore three issues relating to data protection and security. Firstly, it will explore how we describe ethnographic “data” in terms that are legible to data security specialists. Secondly, reflecting on the year-long process of gaining approval for this project, it will examine the bureaucratic and financial barriers to developing efficient and robust data protection practices in policing research. Finally, it will explore ideas for improved practice in negotiating data protection processes in ethnographies of policing.

Session C. Researching Police Malpractice

Internal sexual harassment among police personnel: Insights from a Birmingham, UK cross-sectional survey

Bilal Magsi – Lecturer, BCU

Our research explores the frequency of internal sexual harassment amongst police officers, community officers, special constables and police staff in West Midlands Police's Birmingham Local Policing Area. We report on a pervasive, damaging, and underreported phenomenon through an anonymous online survey distributed to all 2,137 employees (response rate = 19.5%). Our findings show that internal sexual harassment affects one in every five employees, with 8.3% of males and 43% of females victimized, particularly in small police units. More than two-thirds of officers who experience physical sexual harassment and half who experience non-physical sexual harassment are serial victims (three or more incidents), indicating that some staff members are routinely targeted by their peers, especially female officers. Victims reported long-term adverse effects, including stress, anxiety, isolation, and anger, and a quarter considered leaving the organisation. One in ten witness internal sexual harassment; however, bystanders refrain from reporting incidents due to the perception that such conduct constitutes banter or the desire to protect the harasser's reputation. Our research highlights significant policy implications on internal sexual harassment in policing including enhanced training, restorative justice conferencing for low level incidents, confidential complaints channels, protecting victims during grievances and a "Call It Out" campaign to deter sexual harassment via peer shaming. The prevailing culture that tolerates harassment and the "code of silence" can lead to psychological and job-related issues among employees, affecting their performance and trust in the force. Failure to address sexual harassment could harm the force's reputation, employee morale, and recruitment, particularly of women.

Police violence: Understanding individual differences in violent attitudes and behaviour

Rebecca Plimmer – PhD Student, University of Warwick

Police research provides unique challenges from obtaining ethical and force approval, to navigating data sharing, recruitment, and bias towards socially sensitive research. The current work offers practical experience and insight into approaching these challenges, and demonstrates the advantages and disadvantages associated with survey research. A sample of 367 individuals involved in policing including serving officers and periphery police groups (e.g., retired officers, policing students) were surveyed on their attitudes towards violence (support for use of force, violent ideations, rape myths, racism) and self-reported violent behaviour (use of force). The research found that police violent attitudes and behaviour was predicted by dark personality traits such as the dark tetrad and psychological entitlement (study one) and could be explained by moral disengagement theory (study two). Suspect (race, physical dominance, physical attractiveness) and encounter (type of force) characteristics were also found to contribute towards police violent ideation (study three). Specifically, males and females held more lenient use of force opinions when presented with a hypothetical use of force scenario depicting verbal force (cursing) against a suspect. However, for females, lenient use of force opinions were also endorsed when use of force was against a black unattractive female suspect. Overall, these studies highlight the importance of psychological risk factors and have practical implications for police forces regarding the use of psychological screening when identifying, managing and supporting those at risk of violent ideation.

Session D. Researching Procedural Justice

Improving Warwickshire Police Victim Satisfaction

Mariam Abdelnabi – PhD Student, University of Warwick

The principal research question of this study is: "How can improving officer-victim communication enhance victim satisfaction with policing, particularly in cases of vehicle offences?" This research aims to investigate the relationship between the quality of communication between police officers and victims of crime, and the overall satisfaction of these victims with police services. Specifically, the study will focus on victims of vehicle offences, given the high volume and impact of such crimes. By analysing data from Warwickshire Police's internal satisfaction survey and the Athena platform, which logs officer-victim interactions, the research will assess the effectiveness and impact of current communication practices. The study seeks to identify key aspects of communication that significantly influence victim satisfaction, including the frequency, clarity, empathy, and responsiveness of officers' interactions. Insights from this analysis will inform strategies to enhance communication protocols and training programs for police officers. The ultimate goal is to improve the victims' journey through better communication at various points of contact with the police, thereby increasing their overall satisfaction with the policing process. By addressing these aspects, the research aims to provide actionable recommendations for Warwickshire Police to implement improvements, leading to more positive outcomes for victims of vehicle offences and potentially other types of crime.

Navigating the challenges of using BWVs to conduct social systematic observations in stop and search research

Sharda Murria – Senior Lecturer, BCU

This presentation reflects upon a mixed methods Ph.D., which examined the role of BWVs in providing greater transparency and accountability over stop and search encounters. One method employed in the study, involved the use of body-worn video (BWV) footage as a means of conducting social systematic observations (SSOs) of stop and search encounters using a "tracking" methodology. This presentation explores the challenges in researching procedural justice in stop and search. It discusses the difficulties in trying to balance the academic pursuit of seeking to advance our understanding of procedural justice theory, against ensuring that citizens' perceptions of these often highly charged encounters, are represented ethically and fairly; whilst also securing access to research participants. SSOs have recently faced criticism as a reliable method for accurately representing citizen perspectives (Trinkner, 2022). This presentation will explore the feasibility of supplementing SSOs with other research methods, discussing both the practical barriers and ethical considerations involved. The researcher reflects on their experiences of negotiating access to, and conducting interviews with police officers, and scrutiny panel members, as well as conducting observations of scrutiny panels.

Session E. Technology & Natural Language Processing

A Survey Exploring Crime Analysts' Use of NLP and Text Analytics

Darren Cook – Research Fellow, City St George, University of London

Natural Language Processing (NLP) and text analytics are increasingly recognised as valuable tools in crime analysis, yet their practical adoption in policing remains underexplored. This study presents findings from a recent survey of 150 crime and intelligence analysts in the UK and the US, examining responders' familiarity and usage of these technologies, as well as perceived barriers. We address key questions: To what extent are these tools already being used in policing? What challenges prevent their widespread acceptance? And how might training or institutional support enhance their uptake? In this presentation, we outline the survey design alongside our findings. Our results suggest that crime analysts see value in NLP

and text analytics and are keen to integrate them into their work. However, institutional adoption remains limited due to high technical barriers, particularly the need for proficiency in mathematics and programming. Further challenges raised by respondents include organisational constraints and a lack of trust in automation. In response, we discuss strategies for lowering the technical barrier, including low-code tools, targeted training, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Our findings provide a foundation for further engagement with crime analysts and law enforcement agencies on the role of text analytics in criminal intelligence. They also align with the UK government's ambition to 'turbocharge' AI adoption in public services and highlight the need for strategic investment in staff training and infrastructure.

Using an AI-powered Natural Language Processing system in VWAG investigations

Chen Lyu – PhD Student, University of Warwick

Digital evidence is now a key component in Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) investigations, with over 90% of cases involving text messages, social media interactions, or other digital communications. However, law enforcement agencies face significant challenges in managing the overwhelming volume of data, identifying coercive control patterns, and ensuring fair evidence disclosure while maintaining privacy safeguards. Traditional methods, such as manual keyword searches, are insufficient in capturing the nuanced and evolving language used in abusive and manipulative digital interactions. In response to these challenges, we have developed an AI-powered Natural Language Processing (NLP) system, in collaboration with the Forensics Capability Network (FCN) and Dorset Police, supported by the STAR initiative by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). This system integrates Large Language Models (LLMs) and advanced neural architectures to process digital conversations 15 to 20 times faster than manual review while ensuring accuracy, explainability, and fairness in forensic investigations. The AI model moves beyond simple keyword detection by analysing context-aware indicators of coercion, intimidation, and psychological abuse, even when explicit threats are absent. A key innovation of the platform is its conditioned summarization feature, which condenses large-scale conversations into structured reports that highlight patterns of manipulation, escalation, and threat progression. Additionally, persona profiling techniques are being explored to infer psychological and behavioural tendencies based on digital communication patterns, offering further insights for investigators. Beyond VAWG cases, this research has broader implications for digital forensics in organized crime investigations, including drug trafficking and exploitation cases, where coded language and implicit references are commonly used to evade detection. This talk will present the latest advancements in AI-driven digital forensics for VAWG, strategies for collaborating with law enforcement when developing AI systems, and the future directions for integrating AI into forensic investigations.