

# What is offender profiling?

Offender profiling is grounded in the belief that it is possible to work out the characteristics of an offender by examining the characteristics of their offences. As Ainsworth (2001; p.7) puts it,

“profiling generally refers to the process of using all the available information about a crime, a crime scene, and a victim in order to compose a profile of the (as yet) unknown perpetrator.”

Clearly, then, there is a close relationship between profiling and ‘conventional’ detective work. However, profiling differs from conventional detection in its attempt to use information about how an offence was committed to make suggestions about the psychological characteristics of the offender. Profiling cannot tell police exactly who committed an offence, but it potentially can make predictions about the characteristics an offender is likely to possess. This can help police target their investigation more effectively and prioritise suspects once they have been identified.

An example can help to illustrate this process. David Canter, a leading investigative psychologist (he prefers this term to ‘ profiler’) was approached by the police to help in an investigation into a series of rapes and murders in London in the mid 1980s. Using the information on the crimes supplied by the police, Canter applied psychological principles to suggest where the offender was living (in the area of the first three attacks), the type of job he did (semi-skilled labour, possibly connected to the railways), the sort of social life he had (a loner with only one or two close male friends) and his history of offending. Canter’s profile allowed the police to review their list of suspects and prioritise John Duffy for further investigation. He was placed under observation and subsequently arrested, charged, tried and convicted. Canter’s profile proved to be remarkably accurate. It is important to note, however, that the profile was not used to prove that Duffy was the attacker; its contribution to the case was to help the police narrow down their list of thousands of suspects and to target their subsequent investigations more effectively.

Canter’s approach to profiling represents one of four main approaches to offender profiling identified by Ainsworth (2001). These are:

- **The geographical approach** – this looks at patterns in the location and timing of offences to make judgements about links between crimes and suggestions about where offenders live and work.
- **Investigative psychology** – this grew out of geographical profiling and uses established psychological theories and methods of analysis to predict offender characteristics from offending behaviour.
- **The typological approach** – this involves looking at the characteristics of crime scenes to assign offenders to different categories, each category of offender having different typical characteristics.
- **The clinical approach** – this approach uses insights from psychiatry and clinical psychology to aid investigation where an offender is thought to be suffering from a mental illness or other psychological abnormality.

There is considerable debate about which of these approaches is the most effective way of profiling offenders and, indeed, whether psychological profiling has anything useful to offer at all. There is also an ongoing debate about whether offender profiling is an art or a science and the extent to which a scientific approach to offender profiling is possible.