

# The psychology of catching burglars

Professor David Canter has a system to catch burglars ... if only Boris Johnson could fix the computer

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Professor David Canter says: 'It's getting behind the dots on the map to understand how a criminal makes sense of and uses places' Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

As the new coalition grapples with the problem of cutting the cost of policing without increasing [crime](#), help could be at hand from the [University of Huddersfield](#). A team at its research centre for investigative [psychology](#) has developed a computer system that could improve burglary detection rates by between 10% and 20% "for virtually no extra cost", according to its director, Professor David Canter.

This is no idle boast. For 25 years, at three different universities, Canter, 66, has been helping [police](#) with their inquiries. But he is at pains to dissociate himself from the portrayal of his trade in fictional programmes such as *Waking the Dead*, *CSI* and *Cracker*. "It's very misleading to think that psychologists will ever solve crimes," he says. "What we're doing is developing a new understanding of criminal behaviour, as well as whole strategies and styles of what I call problem-solving research."

It began in 1985 when Canter was at Surrey University investigating how people react to emergencies such as fires with regard to the evacuation of buildings. The work brought him into contact with the police at a time when three forces were desperate to catch the so-called "Railway Rapist" and serial killer who had attacked 18 women in 12 months.

"I was approached by a senior officer in the Met who had seen a television documentary on offender profiling by the FBI," he recalls. The message from cop to academic was: "Can you help us catch this man before he kills again?" It was the first time in the UK that a psychologist had been used in a major investigation, and it would lead to Canter developing the field of investigative psychology from scratch.

To cut a long story short, John Duffy was brought to justice for the murders and rapes. Canter "contributed to his capture", as he puts it, by applying a process that would become known as geographical profiling – "getting behind the dots on the map to understand how a criminal makes sense of and uses places". It gave the police vital clues as to the offender's location as well as a detailed profile of his habits and traits. And it is that kind of detailed profiling that Canter and his team hope to bring to the less grizzly but far more widespread and extremely costly crime of burglary.

With some funding from the Metropolitan police, they have developed an interactive geo-behavioural profiling system. "We're not the only ones working on projects like this," he says. "But all the other systems work at the aggregate level. The [mathematics](#) are averaged across a set of offenders and then applied to a particular case. We've always known that that is limited. We've now got a way of doing it that allows us to develop a system for each individual offender. The maths is adjusted according to the individual."

An exciting development? "It is," he says and goes on to outline the potential consequences. "One is theoretical. Yes, we want to help the police but, in a sense, what universities are for is to develop understanding and contribute to knowledge. Because this is a research tool, it gives us the basis to explore in much more detail the activities of offenders." And the practical consequences? "If one in 10 burglaries is solved, then a police force is doing quite well. It's rarely more than 12%." So the Huddersfield system could double detection rates? "For sure," Canter says. However: "Our prototype is still lying on a desk somewhere in the Met, unused. I did actually write to Boris Johnson about it when he became mayor [of London]. He said it was a technical matter – in other words that the Met were having problems fitting our computer system with theirs. But that could be overcome. As a taxpayer, I don't want the police to tell me 'We have a three-year programme that will eventually help us to catch the guy'. I want them to catch someone tomorrow and get my telly back."

"The British police are very effective, compared to other forces around the world, at dealing with the here and now – issues such as crowd control or murder investigations. But they don't have a framework for following through on strategic issues. And the Met has enormous problems because it's so big. They have our pilot, which shows the system can work ... But it's never been used in relation to an actual case, as far as I know."

So does that leave the project in limbo? "Well ... the next stage is for the Met to give us the resources to turn the prototype into something operational. And that's where we've got stuck. I am now rebuilding it in Huddersfield, using different mathematics, and trying to make it more sophisticated."

What emerges may yet be of interest to politicians more elevated than Boris Johnson as the new government seeks ways of fighting crime while making financial savings.

- David Canter's *Forensic Psychology: A Very Short Introduction* will be published by Oxford University Press this summer, at £7.99