

# Policing research and engagement

## Interview with Adam Crawford

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Adam Crawford is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences of the United Kingdom and an Honorary Lifetime Member of the British Society of Criminology – a status granted to esteemed scholars whose contributions have left an indelible mark on Criminology at a national and often at an international level. He is a Professor of Policing and Social Justice at York Law School, University of York, as well as a Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the Centre for Criminal Justice Studies in the School of Law, University of Leeds<sup>1</sup>. Adam is author, co-author, editor, and co-editor of 17 books, 61 book chapters, 52 papers, 5 entries in academic dictionaries, and 7 book reviews, which result in an extensive list of influential publications on policing, crime prevention, community safety and underlying themes such as governance, networks and partnerships. He has been organiser or co-organiser of several international research networks, while also engaging with practitioners in partnership projects involving university, police, government and non-government organisations. Adam granted this interview in October 2023, as my period as a visiting researcher under his supervision at York Law School<sup>2</sup> was coming to an end.

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1. His institutional webpages are available respectively at: <https://www.york.ac.uk/law/people/crawford/> and <https://essl.leeds.ac.uk/law/staff/187/professor-adam-crawford>.
2. Research internship abroad supported by the São Paulo Research Foundation (Fapesp, Processes 2021/02709-3 e 2022/10622-8).

*Adam, initially I think it would be interesting to know about the beginning of your career. What led you to do your BA in Law and Sociology at the University of Warwick and, in general, what sparked your interest in criminology?*

From the outset, I've always been interested in things at the margins, the possibilities of traversing boundaries, and what happens when you erode borders. Hence, I have always been attracted to multi- or inter-disciplinary studies. As someone strongly committed to the social sciences – the study of the manner in which people interact, behave and influence the world around us; in essence, how society works – I was attracted to law and sociology as a joint degree for a number of reasons.

Firstly, due to my interest in social order – the Durkheimian question of what holds society together – which, in essence, is the subject of both law and sociology. Laws seek to codify norms and rules to bind and reflect social solidarity, while sociology seeks to explain both the presence and absence of social order. Secondly, they provide very different perspectives. Law is an old and established discipline, whereas sociology has a much more recent origin. Law seemed to me to be decidedly conservative, whereas sociology with its Marxist influences (at least in the early 1980s) was appealingly radical. That friction between different disciplines and the intellectual sparks produced in their ambiguous interface is what attracted me. Studying Law and Sociology in the early/mid-1980s drew me further into my interest in crime, harm and disorder, as this was the period of Thatcherism, urban unrest and industrial dispute, most notably the Miners' Strike of 1984/5. During this time the use of criminalisation and the power of state coercion to manage and suppress political dissent, urban disorder and industrial relations seemed so stark, oppressive, and yet intriguing. This sowed the seed of my subsequent interest in criminology. But I have always been something of a reluctant criminologist, more interested in the mundane nature of social (dis)order than spectacular representations of crime and punishment.

Warwick was unique in offering this degree – the only one in the UK at the time – in part due to its own radical tradition of studying and teaching law in context as a social science – rather than as a doctrinal 'black letter' subject-matter.

*You received a MPhil in Criminology from the University of Cambridge and a PhD in Criminology from the University of Leeds. Can you tell us about the research you carried out in your postgraduate studies? How have your interests evolved and what were your influences at that time?*

I was very fortunate to get an ESRC scholarship to Cambridge University, where I was exposed to some great minds and ideas. It was a very different environment from the functionalist and brutalist buildings of Warwick to find yourself in beautiful crenelated Cambridge colleges steeped in medieval history. It all took some getting used to, and yet a year is not a long time in which to do so!

It is not surprising, therefore, that my MPhil dissertation was a historical one, exploring the racist discourses that accompanied the criminalization of Irish and migrant populations in Victorian England. I was massively influenced by the wonderful social histories of EP Thompson, who I had the pleasure to meet on a number of occasions while a student at Warwick. Despite the use of the law as an instrument of oppression and inequality reinforcement, which he documented so vividly in relation to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century England, Thompson (1975, p. 266) held fast to the notion that the rule of law is ‘an unqualified human good’, albeit premised on a ‘bloody minded’ distrust of the state. I still think he is one of the most important British thinkers of the twentieth century. I was also heavily influenced by another intellectual titan at the time, Stuart Hall, who I also had the pleasure to meet and listen to, including a memorable lecture he gave at Cambridge University in which he embraced the ‘eclecticism of theory’. At the time this rubbed against my rather dogmatic post-structuralist inclinations but subsequently it has come to haunt me and inform my thoughts and work ever since.

My PhD was a study of multi-agency partnership relations between various service providers including the police, local government, and civil society organisations engaged in community safety work in the 1990s. This was a time when partnerships between the police and other health and social care providers were embryonic in the UK and before a statutory duty was introduced via the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which formalised such community safety arrangements. The PhD was subsequently published as the *Local governance of crime* by Oxford University Press (Crawford, 1997). Many of the challenges that were evident in delivering urban safety then remain stubbornly true today (Crawford, 2023).

*After your PhD, what were the main paths followed by your research?*

The first academic job that I got, in 1987, was on the *Second Islington Crime Survey* as a researcher at Middlesex Polytechnic working with Jock Young and colleagues (Crawford *et al.*, 1990). So, by association and to a significant degree by choice, I became drawn into Left Realism at the height of its influence in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Matthews & Young, 1986; Young & Matthews, 1992). This reinforced some very important foundational pillars that have continued to inform my work.

First, recognition of the uneven spatial and social concentration of victimization, social disadvantage and harm. Crime compounds other social ills and forms of deprivation. Any focus on crime necessitates an accompanying focus on inequality.

Second, allied to this is the acknowledgement that crime – despite its decidedly political character frequently deployed as a means of preserving wealth differentials, defending private property and shoring up powerful interests through the institutions of police, prosecution and punishment – is not a proto-revolutionary activity to be romanticized like latter-day Robin Hoods, but is largely intra-class and intra-racial, harming those already most marginalized. However contingent or arbitrary the labelling process of crime, the reality of crime is forged and reproduced in repeated chains of interactions between acts and responses to them. Ordinary people treat crimes as real not only because they have real (harmful) consequences but also because they reproduce them in their responses through social action.

Third, the harm that arises from lived experiences of crime and victimisation demands reformist action in the here-and-now and thus pragmatic engagement with the very structures and institutions that can also serve to perpetuate harm. The state and police – at least in the UK and most of Europe – not only produce and compound extant vulnerabilities and harm but also can serve to mitigate and reduce these. The state is the ultimate power container of last resort invested with the public good and must continually be held to account against such aspirations and values and as an inhibition on arbitrary power. There was a wonderful pamphlet first published in 1979 by the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group (1980), called *In and against the State*, which well captured this paradox and invocation to an ethic of praxis. Social structures like the criminal justice system and police are both a resource for actors to make sense of their actions and a product of that action. For me, this prompts ethical questions not merely about knowledge production but about how knowledge and ideas are mobilized and used, as well as what academic researchers value and how they assume responsibility for their interventions in ways that combine problem-raising and problem-solving.

Fourth, by contrast, the levers and causes of crime lie far from the traditional reach of the criminal justice system and state agencies. As Braithwaite (1989) among others has long noted, most people most of the time do not commit crime not primarily because the law or a judge tells them not to do so, but rather due to legitimate forces of compliance as well as the shame, approbation and levers of parochial social control that are enmeshed in multiple relationships of interdependency, care, family, kinship and community. Importantly, the police and legal authorities are called upon to manage social order, but they do not and cannot create it in the first place. Order is fostered and sustained by much wider processes, institutions, social norms

and values. Thus, there can be no single state-directed (command-and-control type) agency solution to crime, given its complex, multi-faceted causes and effects. This reinforces the marginality of law and legal authorities in most peoples' lives and the importance of informal social control processes and relationships. However, these can be both inclusionary and exclusionary. Moreover, as I noted at the end of the penultimate chapter in my first book: "An assertion of 'community' identity at a local level can be beautifully conciliatory, socially nuanced, and constructive but it can also be parochial, intolerant, oppressive, and unjust" (Crawford 1997, p. 294). My work over the subsequent years has largely been informed by working in and against criminology, as well as within and outside contemporary movements in social theory.

*Throughout your career you have used different concepts, such as extended police family, mixed economy, contractual governance and, more recently, plural policing, everyday security and vulnerability (Crawford, 2003; 2006; Crawford & Lister, 2004; Crawford et al., 2005; Crawford & Hutchinson, 2016). Could you briefly describe what aspects of policing and security you sought to capture with these concepts and how they alternated, complemented or articulated with each other?<sup>3</sup>*

I think what you are pointing to is the fact that I have often sought to deploy, adapt and develop mid-range concepts rather than grand social theories. Ones that can be applied across different domains, disciplines and sectors, but which add value in understanding dimensions of social change, trends and conflicts. All theories and conceptual tools are to some extent clunky. The key to their value is the extent to which what they illuminate outweighs their clunkiness.

The concepts I have drawn, utilized, and developed – as you mention – to a greater or lesser degree have all revolved around the confluence of: first, the boundaries between the police and other public, private, and third sector/civil society organisations (plural policing, extended policing family, partnerships/networked governance, notions of security, etc.); second, the ambiguous borderlines between care and control, prevention and punishment, civil and criminal responses (vulnerabilities, anti-social behaviour, contractual governance, restorative justice, responsive regulation, etc.); third, the role of public, communities and vulnerable individuals in actively shaping practices, informing regulation and behaviours, and in constituting knowledge (everyday security; co-production etc.).

3. Concepts such as plural policing and everyday security have been discussed by Brazilian social scientists and have made up a recent research agenda (Lopes & Paes-Machado, 2021; Patriarca, 2023).

*I would also like to discuss your engagement with practitioners. You are currently a member of the Police Science Council in the United Kingdom<sup>4</sup> and have previously served in other academic reference groups for government. In addition, you participate in, lead, and has even founded partnership projects involving university, police, government and non-government organisations, such as the N8 Policing Research Partnership<sup>5</sup>, the ESRC Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre<sup>6</sup> and the Icarus project.<sup>7</sup> Could you tell us about your position on the role that research has, might have, or should have in informing policing practice and vice-versa?*

This is an important and challenging question and one that plays out quite differently across various parts of the world. I suspect that to many Brazilian and South American readers the very idea of academic researchers engaging with police may seem very alien – given their coercive powers, punitive authority and the histories of discriminatory abuse of civil rights and vulnerable people, as well as the protection of power and privilege. However, from a British context, where the Peelian principles of “policing by consent”, impartiality, minimal use of force and the “historic tradition that the police are the public and the public are the police”,<sup>8</sup> have a considerable ideological sway, it seems particularly important that British police should be held to account against these lofty ideals. To that end, I believe that researchers have a key role and responsibility to engage with policing from both an empirical and normative basis. Moreover, in recent years in the UK, there have been concerted efforts – by government, senior police and universities – to overcome the traditional “dialogue of the deaf” between police and research (Bradley & Nixon, 2009) – as a result of which police training and practice traditionally have been informed more by tacit knowledge, individual “craft” and on-the-street experience rather than empirical research or any rigorous scientific knowledge – under the auspices of the “professionalization of policing” (led by the College of Policing) and the Evidence-Based Policing movement.

Policing is marked by the fact that considerable discretion and scope for abuse is exercised by officers at the front-line, wielding significant coercive powers where oversight, transparency and accountability are often the most absent (although mobile phone video footage and social media have eroded this to some extent).

4. More information at: <https://science.police.uk/about/police-science-council/>.

5. More information at: <https://www.n8prp.org.uk/>.

6. More information at: <https://vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/>.

7. More information at: <https://www.icarus-innovation.eu/>.

8. Accredited to the then Home Secretary, Sir Robert Peel, and associated with the founding of the modern British police via the Metropolitan Police Act 1829.



Given police powers to define a problem in ways that can hasten criminalisation and coercion, it is incumbent that new and improved ways are fashioned through which to provide public services for vulnerable people at risk of harm to reduce crime and victimization. Those who suffer from crime and the harms of exploitation tend to be those already most socially disadvantaged. Crime and policing tend to compound other extant forms of social inequality and marginalization. For policing to overcome its tendencies towards discretionary and often discriminatory practices requires researchers to engage with the conditions under which police can serve both to mitigate, reduce but also exacerbate existing disadvantage and vulnerability.

In this context, engagement with policing is not a vehicle for the realisation of research *for* the police – in place of research *on* or scrutiny *of* the police – but rather the generation of knowledge that harnesses the insights, knowledge and resources of the police themselves (how they define problems and the data they routinely collect) but also simultaneously challenges assumptions and working practices. It is premised upon a theory of change that those practitioners and citizens who are going to use research and apply the knowledge base should be involved in constructing it by actively co-producing the evidence (Crawford, 2020).

However, if research becomes too closely tied to the organisational interests of the police, it will undoubtedly lose its vital critical distance and become an arm of, and justification for, prevailing practices (or dominant programmes of change), rather than an engine of critical reflection and organisational learning. Police are eminently powerful and authoritative actors, well versed at articulating their preferences or interests and imposing their own narrative construction of events on others. Their generic coercive authority differentiates the police from most other public servants. Research within policing partnerships invariably highlights this dimension of power and the frequent tendency of police to dominate collective agendas and sideline dissenting voices. Consequently, policing foregrounds the challenges of managing differential power relations in unavoidable ways. In other contexts, the subtleties of power differentials may be more easily overlooked. My own experiences suggest the value of ‘independent interdependence’ as guiding framework for negotiating the lived realities of engaging with police and policing agencies so as to safeguard research integrity. It also demands attention to forms of governance and accountability that ensure active responsibility for shared outcomes.

Nor should we forget that as researchers engaged in the knowledge productions process, we too have powerful resources that need to be exercised with due care, attention and integrity towards those we seek to study and influence. The knowledge (co-)production process is not free of hierarchies, conflicts and differential power

relations. These require complex and subtle negotiation and ethical management. Hence, we also need to change the ways in which academics engage with practitioners, ordinary citizens, vulnerable groups and research participants in ways that pay due regard to their knowledge and lived experiences.

*Finally, could we end our conversation by looking ahead? In your view, what are the most important issues to be deepened and widened, challenges to be faced, or possibilities to be explored for policing and security research and practice in the coming years?*

The main lesson from our international review of evidence into urban security and crime prevention conducted for the ICARUS project (Crawford, Donkin & Weirich, 2022; Crawford, 2023), is that despite the advances in the evidence base regarding effective harm reduction strategies across cities, very little of this is being implemented in urban safety practices. It is not that we know little about what work – although there remain important gaps in our knowledge as to how learning translates to different contexts – but rather that the knowledge base is not being implemented. Crime prevention, in particular, still remains largely under-resourced and poorly implemented as compared to the resources and investment in the systems of law enforcement, prosecution and punishment. After forty years of experimentation and learning from research, there is now a rich evidence base demonstrating the societal benefits that derive from ‘upstream’ prevention and early interventions. It is evidently more effective to anticipate harm and preempt criminal opportunities by effecting social, physical and technological change than responding to problems once they manifest themselves or by retrofitting solutions after the event. Yet the promise of a sustainable turn to prevention in the field of crime and harm reduction remains stubbornly unfulfilled. Despite the evidence that prevention has played a role in reducing aggregate crime rates across many and diverse jurisdictions, the preoccupation with police, prosecution and punishment maintains a pervasive hold over the political consciousness, legal mindset and cultural sensibilities. The challenge is to effect policy and practice-based change through rigorous research that inserts the voices of those affected by intervention, not simply those delivering them.

This challenge lies at the heart of my currently work as Co-Director of the Vulnerability and Policing Futures Research Centre, which is advancing a programme of place-based and problem-oriented research, knowledge exchange and capacity building. As a largescale, interdisciplinary centre of excellence, it is exploring how vulnerabilities are produced, compounded and mitigated by policing and how best the police and other public services might be harnessed to prevent and reduce vul-



nerabilities. Jointly hosted by the University of York and the University of Leeds, and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, we aim to pioneer new, integrated responses to some of these issues such as county lines drug dealing<sup>9</sup>, modern slavery, domestic abuse and homelessness.

The nature and causes of vulnerabilities are complex and dynamic. As the police are increasingly drawn into working with vulnerable people, they are becoming ever more entwined with the work of other service providers. Too often there's a lack of clarity on roles and shared purpose while at the same time the public have growing concerns about the role and priorities of the police. However, the transformation of data and its use are reshaping public services, providing opportunities to understand and respond to vulnerability in ethically sensitive ways.

Our research is split into three complementary strands. First, place-based research: by combining qualitative research and findings from large public sector datasets, we are exploring how multiple vulnerabilities are compounded within city neighbourhoods. This provides unique insights into how different agencies interact and what needs to happen to reduce harm. Second, problem-oriented research: we are looking at urgent issues that pose particular challenges in the area of vulnerability and policing, such as exploitation by county lines drug networks, online child sexual victimisation, domestic abuse, modern slavery, and the policing of mental illness and homelessness. Third, public and policy engagement: we are investigating public understanding of policing, the issues people feel are most important and the appetite for change, helping to inform public debate, policy and practice.

In what may seem rather ambitious, we are trying to rethink and help refashion the role of policing within a wider framework of public safety and harm reduction. In so doing, we are seeking to integrate insights from data science with qualitative social analysis and the lived experiences of vulnerable people. Our wide-ranging research is built on effective collaborations with police, partner organisations and people with lived experiences. Many work with us on our advisory groups or help to co-produce our research, allowing us to understand perspectives from a range of services and the people who use them, while gaining new insights through a variety of research methods. These partnerships and collaborative initiatives allow us to understand how vulnerability develops in different areas, how organisations can

9. In the UK, county lines describe the practice of traffickers from urban areas travelling to smaller, distant towns and even other counties in order to sell drugs. To do this, criminal networks often recruit or pressure vulnerable people to carry out the transport or sale. More information at: "County lines policing and vulnerability", *Vulnerability & Policing Futures, Research Centre*, <https://vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/county-lines/>.

work together to tackle key problems, and ultimately how we can shape a better future that reduces harm among vulnerable people in society.

The Centre draws together co-investigators from across the UK and we are supported by international partners and an International Advisory Board that is helping us develop our international strategy. This aims to share learning and innovations in theory, process and methods through collaborative academic networks and communities of practitioners; to embed international best practice and research comparisons in the Centre's research programme; and to forge new comparative research collaborations and exploit aligned research opportunities. There is such a lot to do! It is also very exciting working with such a cast of great people and partners.

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