



## The case for economic criminology

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### ABSTRACT

This paper sets out the case for economic criminology. It argues 'economic criminology' is more than just a prefix that brings scholars and papers together exploring economic crime. The paper argues that crimes associated with economic criminology are a significant societal problem that deserves the attention of scholars to understand these problems and develop solutions. The paper illustrates the pool of those studying economic crimes is much wider than criminology, which is very distinct from traditional volume crimes. Indeed, the vast majority of research emanates from beyond 'criminology'. This paper therefore argues 'economic criminology' can act as catholic paradigm to bring together the many disciplinary silos studying economic crime and that this is a natural development of criminology.

The authors recently published the book, 'Economic Crime: From Conception to Response', with Dr Branislav Hock (Button et al., 2022). The inclusion of 'economic crime' in the title arose from years of research and teaching that gradually accommodated a wider range of crime types. It started with fraud and bribery, moved on to money laundering, industrial espionage, cyber-enabled fraud, and anti-trust cartels, and finally caught up with intellectual property crime. The authors then embraced these crime types because they typically share common characteristics with fraud and bribery, such as dishonesty, deception and secrecy. We also noticed that the clear majority of offenders are different to those who commit traditional crimes of burglary, theft and violence. Economic crime offenders include corporate white-collar offenders and ordinary citizens who would not dream of committing burglary or violence. Further these crime types tended to share aetiologies, victim types, harms, control and prevention methods, and policing and justice challenges. As a consequence, the University of Portsmouth changed the name of the Master's degree at the University of Portsmouth from 'Countering Fraud and Corruption' to 'Economic Crime' so that students too could grapple with the distinct features of this crime genus.

However, as colleagues at the University of Portsmouth debated the unfolding concepts and issues, it became clear that they were exploring more than just another typology of crimes with common attributes and challenges. Whilst developing the book, the authors undertook a systematic literature review commissioned by the UK's Home Office with the task of identifying robust research into 'what works' in preventing fraud and money laundering. The extensive and wide-ranging review led to an unexpected and significant finding – that other disciplines

such as computer science, business studies were, by a substantial margin, much more engaged in robust, practical, 'what works' research than mainstream criminologists. For example, a Scopus search using the term 'fraud prevention' for anything published exploring this topic, with the aim to secure an indicative picture of the disciplinary origin of these articles contained 501 publications in the following disciplines:

- computer science 22 %
- social science (including criminology) 16 %
- business and management 12 %
- engineering 12 %
- economics 11 %

Other searches were undertaken, but Scopus offers the unique ability to map the disciplinary origins of articles. It seems that sociology and criminology have a surprisingly minor research contribution with respect to fraud prevention and harm reduction. Indeed, the bulk of criminologists' research deploys its analytical rigour on some very narrow areas of the broader subject of economic crime. For example, in the last recorded fraud statistics published for year ending December 2022 – which provide more detail on types of fraud compared to the CSEW – of the 1.1 million fraud offences recorded there were 7474 romance frauds recorded (ONS, 2023a). This is currently one of the most popular areas of research being explored by criminologists, but it is one type of fraud accounting for 0.6 % of recorded fraud among dozens of others (For the growing body of research see for example, Buchanan and Whitty, 2014; Buil-Gil and Zeng, 2022; Carter, 2021;

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Cross and Layt, 2022; Sinclair et al., 2023).<sup>1</sup> A comparable offence such as investment frauds (targeting individuals) by contrast amounted to 21,459 recorded cases - almost three times as many as romance frauds, but has received much less attention (see Barnes, 2017; and Deliema et al., 2020 for some rare insights). There are also some types of frauds, which are growing in number, where one can find virtually no recent quality research: fake recruitment advertisement fraud, rent fraud, ticket fraud, courier fraud, lottery fraud to illustrate some.

One might argue the growing cybercrime research complex is evidence some criminologists are interested in fraud and in numbers, but cybercrime is much broader than fraud covering many non-economic crimes (see Ibrahim, 2016). Much of the relevant cybercrime research also focuses upon a narrow area of frauds orientated around hacking (Kemp et al., 2021; Leukfeldt, 2014a, 2014b), online shopping frauds (van de Weijer et al., 2019; Whittaker et al., 2022), and phishing and banking/identity frauds (Leukfeldt, 2014a, 2014b; van de Weijer et al., 2019;). Many frauds are still perpetrated by traditional means by telephone and in-person (Choi et al., 2017; Phillips, 2019; Policastro and Payne, 2015). And if we were to consider frauds against organisations (rather than by) this is largely ignored by criminologists, which beyond the authors and their home department in the UK, only a handful of criminology scholars can be found researching, such as Michael Levi, Nicholas Lord and Nicholas Ryder. There is very little research into finding out how to reduce fraud and that which does exist rarely meets the highest standards of the Maryland scale of evaluation (Prenzler, 2020; Sherman, 1998). The rare instances of action-orientated primary research are typically based on interpretivist and constructionist methodologies, seeking opinions and exploring collective experiences by way of interviews and surveys. From the purely positivist perspective, this reliance on collective beliefs carries the risk of entrenching false or weak paradigms. Perhaps more importantly, it is unlikely to convince practitioners. These realisations caused us to reflect on the purpose of our criminology discipline. What are we for?

This discomfiting question is partly a consequence of structural problems within the criminology scholarship. Firstly, the literature review confirmed that the criminological world is substantially indifferent to economic crime. The topic is a fringe interest with very few active researchers, who typically nest in academic siloes. Secondly, there is paucity of funding, which is an especially significant obstacle to expensive action-orientated research. These structural limitations would be reasonable if economic crime were a minor problem. And for many years the lack of measurement led to deviancy attenuation where what was a large problem was given a low priority because of the lack of accurate measurement (Button and Tunley, 2015). The changes to the CSEW have now changed that and it is now clear by a large margin that fraud is the most prevalent category of crime in the UK. With 3.6 million victims in 2022, fraud alone accounted for 40 % of all crimes experienced by individuals (ONS, 2023b), whilst businesses experience about 2.5 million economic crime offence per year (Home Office, 2023a)<sup>2</sup> and the government acknowledges it alone loses up to £55 billion per year to fraud (Cabinet Office., nd). Economic crimes are also not 'victimless', they cause serious psychological and emotional harms, among others, to some individual victims, even leading to suicide (Button et al., 2014; Button et al., 2021; Cross, 2013); they damage businesses (Home Office, 2023a; Peters and Maniam, 2016); they have caused serious economic recessions (Ryder, 2014; United States. Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, 2010) and undermined the development of some countries (Bentzen, 2012; Mo, 2001).

A consequence of scholarly indifference is academic obscurity. Premier conferences pay scant attention to economic crime: just three

out of 250+ papers in the 2022 British Criminology Conference addressed the topic (see <https://bsc2022.co.uk/programme/>). Economic crime does not quite fit into the 'bread and butter' subjects of mainstream criminology conferences:

- Police: there are few interventions and criminal investigations.
- Prisons: even fewer economic crime offenders are prosecuted, let alone incarcerated, whilst other sanctions are much more common.
- Rehabilitation: there is very little interest in rehabilitating economic criminals.
- Violence: rarely a component of economic crime schemes.

Similarly, despite the enormity of the problem, some leading journals are somewhat sniffy towards economic crime, preferring variants of critical criminology that are higher on expression and ideals than substantive purpose. Unfortunately, these elite echo-chambers do not speak to those charged with tackling the crime problem and who need the support of researchers. For instance, of the 98 articles published by the British Journal of Criminology in 2022, just four (4 %) were concerned with aspects of economic crime. They are of commendably high quality and they reflect important efforts in characterising their chosen problems, but they would leave many practitioners and policy-makers wondering, "What does this mean for me?"

This aversion to economic crime in research and publishing is reflected in the typical undergraduate criminology courses. Referring to the most recent Guardian (2023) league table, the UK's three highest ranking criminology courses at Loughborough, Durham and Staffordshire do not include economic crime modules, though Durham and Staffordshire each offer an optional cybercrime module.<sup>3</sup> This is an unfortunate omission because the approach to the social control of economic crime is, as Sutherland (1940) noted, markedly different to traditional crime types. Most detected economic crimes do not touch the criminal justice systems and are dealt with by administrative means, civil, regulatory or employment law (see Button et al., 2015; Levi, 2013). The bodies policing it include a multiplicity of entities from the state, private and voluntary sectors (Button, 2020; Button et al., 2022; Button and Whittaker, 2021; Kshetri, 2011; Levi, 2013; Sorell, 2019). Money laundering, bribery and tax legislation has fuelled a whole industry of private policing, compliance, and prevention bringing with it new expertise, skills and methods. The government's recently launched Counter Fraud Profession alone has 16,000 members, 20 times the number of police officers dedicated to economic crime (Cabinet Office., nd; Home Office, 2023b).

Developing effective approaches to crime reduction requires a fuller understanding of victims and offenders, cultures, perceptions, attitudes, and resilience. It is in these areas that economic crime is different to traditional crimes. For example, most people do not commit violence because they do not have violent dispositions. On the other hand, everyone is dishonest to some extent (Ariely, 2012), so it is unsurprising that most people commit a minor economic crime at some point in their lives (Karstedt and Farrall, 2006). As a consequence, economic crime is unique in the range of both offenders and victims: individuals, small businesses, large corporations, governments, and organised crime groups. These mostly unseen crimes touch every area of life, yet the UK public sees fraud and business crimes as less serious than non-criminal anti-social behaviour (Ipsos Mori, 2022). Are the police, therefore, justified in avoiding economic crime? Should the focus be on non-criminal justice (Lord, 2022). What should this justice look like? Perhaps it would be more efficient and effective to strengthen resilience and prevention. Where should this enhanced resilience be located? How might this be achieved?

<sup>1</sup> The authors are not arguing for less research on romance fraud, rather there should be more research on other types of fraud.

<sup>2</sup> The 2.5 million estimate is extrapolated from a Home Office business economic crime survey which covered a limited range of business sectors in 2020.

<sup>3</sup> See [https://www.lboro.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/criminology/#modules\\_year\\_1](https://www.lboro.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/criminology/#modules_year_1), <https://www.durham.ac.uk/study/courses/1370/>, <https://www.staffs.ac.uk/course/criminology-bsc-msci#contents>

To answer such questions and deliver meaningful impact, the researchers, teachers, trainers, practitioners and policy-makers need to have specialist economic crime skills and knowledge. They also need to draw on the specialist skills and knowledge of multiple disciplines. The criminology scholarship has itself spawned specialist sub-disciplines such as biosocial, Black, convict, cultural, environmental, green, Marxist, and queer criminologies. Criminology has much to offer, but it cannot deliver change on its own and critical discourse simply will not cut it. The problem requires collective action from a broad church of disciplines, including criminology, computer science, engineering, business management, ethics, behavioural science, law, and undoubtedly others. In considering the need for inclusivity and breaking down the siloed barriers, it became apparent that we need to shift our thinking and questioning away from, “Will this research be of interest to my discipline?” to “How can I work with a computer scientist to tackle the problem?”.

This shift in purpose helped stimulate the concept of ‘economic criminology’, a multi-disciplinary catholic space for the eclectic study of economic crime. It includes the vital step of characterising a multitude of problems, but it should also embrace the development of policies, practices, tools and methods for tackling it. The ‘economic criminology’ term signals our purpose, who we are, and what we do. In doing so, it hopefully raises the multi-discipline from obscurity. And attract more funding and interest.

The idea of economic criminology is, of course, inextricably linked to the concept of economic crime and the practical consideration of which crimes and non-criminalised deviant behaviours belong to this umbrella label. Analytical rigour suggests that the concept is first defined, and offences evaluated to determine whether they comply with the concept. In practice, this is a somewhat iterative process as the concept is constructed around the observed facts. For example, the term ‘crime’ refers to an act that is prohibited and criminalised in law, yet, as Sutherland (1940) observed, many bad corporate behaviours are not criminalised. This problem is compounded by variations in law and culture such that an act criminalised in one jurisdiction is regarded as acceptable, non-criminal behaviour in another. The issue is further exacerbated by the decriminalisation of corporate offending, such as the European Commission’s regulatory approach to anti-trust offences and the emergence of Deferred Prosecution Agreements for corporate bribery cases (Button et al., 2022; Lord, 2022). These issues illustrate how defining concepts that make sense in the real world is an inexact, messy business. Nevertheless, we constructed a definition for economic crime that is conceptually coherent and includes an illustrative typology of crimes:

Economic crime is a typology of financially motivated crimes and deviant acts perpetrated by corporations, groups or individuals, which take place predominantly by deception, without threat of or actual physical force, against any person or entity, with the intention of making a gain or causing a loss, and where there is a prima facie case for criminal, regulatory or civil justice. It commonly includes crimes predominantly linked to the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services, such as fraud, bribery, money laundering and terrorist financing, intellectual property crime, industrial (and economic) espionage, market manipulation, tax evasion, and financially motivated cybercrime (Button et al., 2022, p13).

This definition does have blurred edges, especially with respect to the typology. It has already stimulated debate, which will hopefully lead to a better definition. More importantly, we hope the debate generates a better understanding of the problem. For instance, in the context of unprecedented economic sanctions against Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, the typology has been criticised for omitting sanctions busting. Similarly, one of our Master’s students has stimulated a continuing debate about whether human trafficking is an economic crime because it often involves deceiving victims. Another student with substantial professional experience of wildlife crime sees the illicit trade

in animals and animal parts as inextricably linked to bribery and other forms of corruption. He chose to study economic crime in order to help him tackle the wildlife crime problem. His ambition reflects our vision and purpose for *doing* economic criminology.

We are therefore convinced that we are at an exciting point in the development of economic criminology and the broader field of criminology. The journal this paper is published in provides the forum and the foundations for scholars of multiple disciplines to share their work in. But there is much more work that needs to be done. Conferences such as the Cambridge Economic Crime Symposium and Portsmouth conferences need to be supplemented by other academic events in other countries. Funders need to dedicate more resources to exploring economic crime and particularly what works in countering it. More scholars need to take interest in this subject, it should not be a niche area for a few. Their research efforts must then be turned into outputs which are widely disseminated at the lowest costs possible. There is much work to be done, there will no doubt be debates, perhaps even heated debates about economic crime (indeed we hope there will), but if there is any point to academia it should be to make a difference and the scale of the problem of economic crime means our difference is really needed.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have no declarations to declare in relation to this paper.

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