PURPOSE: Crime analysts and researchers of crime patterns know intuitively, and empirically, that ‘context matters’. That is, crime patterns are caused by a multitude of factors, and these are not easily disentangled from one another. For instance, research often looks to determine correlates of offending behavior at the individual (offender) level, or at the place level to make sense of crime patterns.

Traditional data analysis techniques such as regression or correlation analysis are concerned with single predictors (variables) of crime, or the effects of associations between pairs of variables. What these quantitative approaches cannot do is consider the complex causal relationships of combinations of variables.

Conjunctive Analysis of Case Configurations (CACC) is a data analysis technique that overcomes these limitations, and specifically looks at the composite profile of a particular unit of analysis (that is, a person or a place). The technique is used to understand the complex causal relationships that emerge when combinations of variables are present or absent when examining a particular outcome such as crime. It builds on other qualitative approaches (such as qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) methods) and generates analytical results on the profile of characteristics associated with crime and offenders.

CACC can be used to explore patterns in data or in support of more formal tests of research hypotheses. It was first introduced as a method in Criminology by Miethe and colleagues in 2008. Since then a growing number of studies have employed CACC to identify dominant case configurations in data, and to explore the diversity within case configurations, and other patterns that are not easily identified and/or quantified with more traditional analytic techniques. In academic research, CACC has been used to better understand patterns in carjacking outcomes; intimate partner violence; crime and the distribution of alcohol outlets; police discretion; strategies for preventing maritime pirate attacks; and the violent victimization of university students.

Whilst there is no obvious theoretical orientation to the CACC technique, the purpose of it is clear; to find patterns in data which have multiple characteristics associated with crime (or other constructs of criminal behavior). Because of this, it could plausibly be employed to test a number of theoretical propositions and has much wider application in the crime prevention practitioner world. As the technique can generate place-based composite profiles, it is also a plausible way of CACC lends itself to defining control areas when conducting evaluation analyses. Future research will benefit from the continued application of CACC as it provides a richer understanding of how ‘context matters’.