THE HOME OFFICE:
Is Mobile Phone Data Needed for a Conviction?

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Introduction

The Home Office is a leading government agency, which deals with terrorism, crime, drugs policy, fire, and immigration. Over summer, I took part in an internship lasting 6 weeks, in the Crime and Policing Analysis Unit (CPAU). I worked on one particular project, which focused on the growing use of digital forensics within the criminal justice system, and how this places extra pressure and burdens on the police.

Objectives

The aim of the project was to uncover the relevance of digital forensics within the courtroom, and more specifically, whether it had an impact on appeal outcomes.

With the modern, digitised world witnessing a rapid advancement in technology, the police have seen an influx in cases with digital evidence, which is a huge burden on their workload. Thus, research into how to deal with this is necessary.

Key Findings

Once the data was inserted into Excel from the software 'CloudNine', I carried out explanatory analysis, to see what proportion of all cases had digital evidence. From the results, I found that SMS was the most common type of evidence, mobile phones were the most common device type, sexual offences had the most digital evidence, and the majority of appeal outcomes were refused.

Method

The dataset we used consisted of three online, publically available databases: LexisNexis, WestLaw and BAILII. We scraped the appeal case transcripts from these databases into a software called CloudNine, in order to effectively read through them, and select the correct drop-down options for each parameter. These included date of offence, age and gender of defendant, appeal outcome, and offence type, device type, and type of evidence. The most important parameter, however, was relevance of the digital evidence. We ranked these none, low, medium or high.

Key skills

I think it is important to note that as I used Excel (which I have used in great length within my course), I didn't massively improve on my quantitative skills. However, working in such a prestigious place provided me with crucial 'softer' skills, like time management, organisation, and independence. As well as working on the project, I was lucky enough to attend colleagues' presentations of the projects they'd been working on. This taught me a lot about how professional presentations are laid out and gave me the confidence to do public speaking in the future.

The barriers I faced were most relevant towards the beginning of the internship. As the software 'CloudNine' was playing up, and we were relying on another member of the team to fix it, who had family problems, I was almost running out of things to do and didn't want to get bored. However, this gave me the confidence to use my initiative and be confident enough to ask a fellow member of the team whether they needed help with anything. As a result, I got started on the literature review, which my manager suggested, and ended up doing in great detail – to which she was really impressed. Thus, while being a team player is vital in the world of work, using one's initiative and being independent is also needed to succeed. As well as this, it taught me to stay determined and self-motivated, even when faced with difficulties.

Conclusion

As the majority of the internship was spent reading through transcripts, there was a limited amount of time for quantitative analysis. What we did find, however, is that criminal justice policy needs to allow for the extra burden on police to deal with digital forensics.