

Crime Pattern Querying Guide

A Practical Querying Guide

Extract More Value from Your Crime Data

By Deborah Osborne

Author of "Elements of Crime Patterns: A Foundation for Theory and Practice"

Why This Guide Matters

Most crime patterns go undetected not because the data doesn't exist, but because we don't know what to search for or how to search for it. This guide provides practical strategies for querying crime databases to identify behavioral patterns that link crimes committed by the same offender.

Core Principle: All similar crimes committed by the same person are serial crimes, regardless of the crime type. Your database contains behavioral details that can connect these crimes—if you know how to look.

The Systems Approach to Querying

Traditional searches focus on single variables: "armed robbery" or "blue sedan." Effective pattern recognition requires thinking in behavioral systems—combinations of variables that reveal how an offender operates.

Four Essential Query Categories

- **OFFENDER BEHAVIOR SYSTEM:** How does the offender approach victims? What does the offender say or do during the crime? How does the offender leave the scene?
- **TARGET SELECTION SYSTEM:** What type of victims or locations does the offender choose? What vulnerabilities does the offender exploit? What does the offender avoid?
- **TEMPORAL-SPATIAL SYSTEM:** When does the offender strike (day, time, season)? Where does the offender operate (specific areas, routes)? What environmental conditions are present?
- **PROPERTY-EVIDENCE SYSTEM:** What is taken, damaged, or left behind? What tools or weapons are used? What forensic traces remain?

Building Effective Search Queries

Start Broad, Then Narrow

DON'T: Search for exact matches of everything at once

DO: Begin with 1-2 distinctive behavioral elements, then add variables

Example Progression:

Initial Query: "convenience store" + "midnight to 2am"

Returns: 47 cases

Add Behavior: + "asked for specific cigarette brand"

Returns: 8 cases

Add Detail: + "apologized" OR "said please/thank you"

Returns: 3 cases—potential series

Use Behavioral Synonyms

Different officers describe the same behavior differently. Search multiple terms:

Instead of searching only:	Also search:
"tall"	"6 feet," "above average height," "looked down at victim"
"ran away"	"fled on foot," "left quickly," "departed," "exited rapidly"
"demanded money"	"ordered," "told," "said give me," "asked for"
"nervous"	"shaky," "fidgety," "anxious," "jumpy," "hands trembling"

Search for Distinctive, Not Common

Low Value Queries (too common to link):

- "Male suspect"
- "Handgun"
- "Cash taken"
- "Fled scene"

High Value Queries (distinctive behavioral details):

- "Gold front tooth" + "red baseball cap"
- "Apologized before demanding money"
- "Walked with distinctive limp on right leg"
- "Veterinary clinic" + "controlled substances"
- "Asked victims if they were okay"
- "Medicinal smell" + "careful gait"

Query Strategy: A 5-Variable Framework

For maximum pattern recognition, search combinations across five variable types:

1. Physical Descriptors

Beyond basic demographics, focus on:

- Distinctive features (scars, tattoos, gold teeth, unusual eyes)
- Consistent clothing items (same hat, shoes, jacket across incidents)
- Memorable characteristics (height extremes, distinctive voice, limp)

Query Example: "bright blue eyes" AND ("black bandana" OR "balaclava") AND "gloves"

2. Verbal Behavior

What offenders say reveals consistency:

- Specific phrases used
- Polite vs. aggressive language
- Accent or speech pattern
- Questions asked

Query Example: "apologized" AND ("please" OR "thank you") AND "register money"

3. Location Characteristics

Beyond addresses, search for:

- Building types (standalone vs. strip mall)
- Access points (rear entrance, alley-facing)
- Environmental features (poor lighting, minimal visibility)
- Proximity patterns (near highways, isolated areas)

Query Example: "pharmacy" AND ("standalone building" OR "24 hour") AND "rear entrance"

4. Temporal Patterns

Time reveals routine:

- Specific time windows (always 11pm-1am)
- Day patterns (every Tuesday, weekends only)
- Calendar connections (first week of month, around holidays)
- Seasonal activity

Query Example: "first week" AND "month" AND "burglary" AND "business"

5. Method Elements

How crimes are committed:

- Entry method (crowbar, window, unlocked door)
- Search patterns (specific locations searched)
- Interaction style (speaks calmly, makes threats, uses force level)
- Departure behavior (specific exit route, vehicle type)

Query Example: "crowbar" AND "office search" AND "ignored electronics" AND "cash only"

Practical Query Examples

Example 1: The Polite Robber

Distinctive Behaviors Identified:

- Always says "please" and "thank you"
- Apologizes before demanding money
- Asks victims if they're "okay" before leaving
- Distinctive limp on left leg

Effective Query: (robbery OR "armed robbery") AND ("apologized" OR "said sorry") AND ("please" OR "thank you") AND ("limp" OR "walked carefully" OR "favored leg")

Example 2: The Veterinary Clinic Burglar

Pattern Elements:

- Targets veterinary clinics specifically
- Breaks in through adjoining walls or rear entries
- Steals controlled substances and cash
- Occurs within short time span
- Multiple jurisdictions

Effective Query: ("veterinary" OR "vet clinic" OR "animal hospital") AND ("burglary" OR "break-in") AND ("controlled substances" OR "drugs" OR "medications") AND [date range: within 3 months]

Example 3: The Elevator Rapist

Unique Location Pattern:

- Vertical spaces (elevators, stairway landings)
- Multi-story buildings
- Enclosed/isolated areas
- Similar victim selection

Effective Query: ("sexual assault" OR "rape") AND ("elevator" OR "stairway" OR "stairwell" OR "landing") AND [geographic cluster]

Common Query Mistakes to Avoid

✗ Searching Too Narrowly

Mistake: Requiring every detail to match exactly

Solution: Start with 2-3 distinctive variables, then expand

✗ Ignoring Behavioral Synonyms

Mistake: Searching only "tall suspect"

Solution: Include "6 feet," "above average height," "looked down at"

✗ Focusing Only on Common Elements

Mistake: "Male, 20s, handgun, convenience store"

Solution: Add distinctive details: "gold tooth," "specific phrase used," "red cap"

✗ Missing Related Crimes

Mistake: Only searching primary crime type

Solution: Query related offenses in same area/timeframe

✗ Forgetting Time Windows

Mistake: Searching all dates equally

Solution: Focus on realistic series timeframes (days to months, not years)

Quick Reference: Query Checklist

Before running your search, verify:

- ☐ **Am I searching for distinctive behaviors?** (not just common demographics)
- ☐ **Have I included behavioral synonyms?** (multiple ways to describe same action)
- ☐ **Am I using realistic date ranges?** (series occur within weeks/months)
- ☐ **Did I cross-reference location variables?** (specific building features, not just addresses)
- ☐ **Am I searching combinations?** (2-5 variables together, not isolation)
- ☐ **Have I included verbal behaviors?** (phrases, speech patterns, interaction style)
- ☐ **Did I search related offense types?** (suspicious person calls, failed attempts)

Putting It Into Practice

Exercise: Build Your Own Query Strategy

1. **Select an unsolved case** from your jurisdiction with at least 3 distinctive behavioral elements
2. **Identify the most memorable details:**
 - What did the offender say or do that was unusual?
 - What was distinctive about physical appearance?
 - What location features were present?
 - What was the interaction style?
3. **Create a base query** with your 2 most distinctive variables
4. **Run the search and review results**
5. **Refine by adding one more behavioral variable** if needed
6. **Check the timeline** - do incidents cluster within a realistic series timeframe?

Next Steps: Deepening Your Analysis

This guide introduces the fundamentals of behavioral querying for crime pattern recognition. For comprehensive coverage of:

- **24 specific crime pattern elements** (from physical descriptors to communication patterns)
- **27 crime-specific chapters** (with behavioral elements unique to each type)
- **Case scenarios** for each crime pattern elements and crime type
- **Systematic linkage methodologies**
- **Critical thinking frameworks** for pattern validation

See *"Elements of Crime Patterns: A Foundation for Theory and Practice"* by Deborah Osborne (Routledge, 2026).

About the Author

Deborah Osborne served as the first crime analyst for the Buffalo Police Department and was an investigative analyst with the U.S. Secret Service. She has received awards from the International Association of Crime Analysts (IACA) and the International Association of Law Enforcement Intelligence Analysts (IALEIA) for her contributions to the field. Her comprehensive documentation of crime pattern elements represents decades of practical experience in pattern recognition and behavioral linkage analysis.

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