# WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT CRIME

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# Introduction

What do we talk about when we talk about crime? We talk about harm, hurt, sometimes pain; we talk about it with outrage, anger and even humour. Often though, we talk about crime through personal stories, and, increasingly, we seem to tell them in public.

We all know that the law formally defines what can be treated as a crime. But to *make something* a crime – to invoke the processes and procedures that recognise something as 'crime' – we usually tell a story about it. When my laptop was stolen, I told the hotel receptionist what happened, and he advised me what to do. I spoke to the police and then took my officially approved story to my insurance company, which sent me money to buy a new computer.

If once talking about an experience of crime was confined to private or professional settings – the police station, the courtroom, a helpline or counsellor's office – today, they seem to be everywhere. Bookshop shelves heave with autobiographies by prisoners, victims, police and barristers; streaming platforms like Netflix and YouTube host hours of interviews with serial killers, death-row residents, vigilantes and gang members; podcasts host a cacophony of personal anecdotes, and crimes are even live-streamed on social media. The past few decades have seen a remarkable rise in

people speaking about crime publicly, as victims, witnesses, as people accused of, or convicted of breaking the law.

When we hear people talking about crime, we tend to pay attention to what is told about: the gory details, the emotional drama, the aftermath. Content is important, but when people talk about crime, there's a lot more going on. As described above, stories also make things happen. This book takes seven examples of people speaking about their experience of crime and examines the kinds of stories told, what they can do, and who for. The book responds to two common assumptions: firstly, that people's stories offer an unvarnished version of the truth, and secondly, that talking about crime is inherently good and is a way to address harms and do justice.

Social researchers have long been interested in narratives and stories, but criminology is late to the party perhaps because we have the least reliable narrators, as leading narrative criminologist Professor Lois Presser observes. Criminologists interested in stories ask questions like: How do stories motivate people to harm others? What kinds of personal narratives can help people make sense of an experience of crime? How can stories resist harmful phenomenon? The book draws gratefully on the insights of these scholars and their work, listed in the acknowledgements. A note on terminology: I use 'personal story' and 'narrative' interchangeably, reflecting the complex relationship between experience and story. Some stories have a beginning, middle and end, but they may be partial, or hinted at. There are many ways to interpret narratives; my approach is broadly sociological and constructionist. Narrative theorist Catherine Kohler Riess-

man prompted me to ask: 'Why was the story told that way?' and Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein pointed me to consider the profound role of context in shaping personal stories. Ken Plummer's work directed me to consider the social and historical context of personal narratives.

This book examines a snapshot of contemporary crime narratives and chapters include different kinds of media, including books, podcasts, television documentaries and even unpublished autobiography in the form of letters. Taken together, they reflect the way that speaking publicly about crime has become quotidian. I tried to include speakers from different genders, ages, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, but most have some connection to the UK, where I live and work. Of course, there are omissions: not everyone is empowered to speak about crime in public. Personal narratives about crime are often treated as low-brow or suspect (criminals lie, don't they?) but I take them seriously as phenomena in their own right because they are, to my mind, at least as important as print journalism, fiction or films in shaping how we know about crime today. This book explores what telling stories about crime can do, and who for. It challenges the idea that personal stories offer an exact insight into experience and considers whether talking about crime is even a good thing.