

Whodunnit? Do officers have the skills they need to answer that eternal question?

Adrian James; Laura Pajon; Freya O'Brien; Richard Carr – all Liverpool Centre for Advanced Policing Studies, Liverpool John Moores University

Executive Summary

The study

1. The research was funded by Liverpool John Moores University. It was supported actively by the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) Recruitment, Retention and Wellbeing of Investigators Working Group, by the UK College of Policing, and by the five police forces in England and Wales that supplied research participants for it. Forces and individuals took part in the study on the condition of anonymity. They have not been named in this report. The research team offers its sincere thanks to them all for their support for the study.
2. As a scoping review, the research team knew the study would raise as many questions as it answered but hoped that the evidence it delivered, would provide clarity around the challenges currently facing investigators and thus highlight priorities for future research. Its overarching aim was to gather detectives' assessments of their working environment. It also aimed to explore, empirically, the reasons for, and the consequences of, the national shortfall in detective numbers; to show gaps in investigative support; to identify challenges to optimal performance; and to report on what investigators said they needed to advance investigative performance.

Research method and sample

3. In total, researchers interviewed 42 investigators across five forces. Participants included PSIs and detectives up to the rank of superintendent. Most respondents (35) worked on the investigative frontline; in mainstream Criminal Investigation Departments (CID) or in other frontline roles involving: protecting vulnerable adults and children; preventing and detecting child sexual abuse; or investigating sexual offences. For this summary, those roles are referred to, collectively, as PVP.
4. Twenty-six participants were male and 16 were female. Of those employed on the investigative front line, four were senior detectives with supervisory responsibilities that spanned every aspect of criminal investigation; 15 were experienced investigators working in main CID offices (of these, three were PSIs); six were experienced investigators working in the other public facing roles described above; six were novice investigators working in mainstream CID; and four were novice investigators working in PVP units.

Research findings

New investigators

5. All 11 novice investigators (who also were new to policing) had applied for the role believing it would deliver a satisfying and rewarding vocation that would provide opportunities to make a difference and to help people. Some said they welcomed the independence to conduct their own investigations. Others believed the role would raise their status in the eyes of the public or offer them the chance of rapid career progression or professional development.
6. All, believed that even though they were working in high pressure environments, they were coping with the role. Novices were satisfied that their expectations were being (or would be) met. Though many named factors that were limiting their ability to achieve their professional goals. Various, these were: excessively high workloads (negatively affecting individuals' ability to balance the competing demands of work, family, and social life); lack of peer support (particularly in the context of a shortage of trained mentors); and the competing demands of academic and workplace learning when they also were expected to carry a full caseload.
7. The views expressed by novices that despite being (according to one) thrown it at the deep end, they were coping with role, will make welcome reading for many but they should be contrasted with those of many experienced investigators; one of whom said that the former, 'didn't know what they didn't know' and that staff shortages and lack of experience in investigative departments meant that in some cases, 'it was the blind leading the blind'. Similar views were expressed in every one of the participating forces. Some participants were more positive, believing that expectations of the novices needed to be tempered; they would make good investigators, but it would take time and others should hold off on making any assessment of the investigators until they had a chance to gain experience.
8. One participant said that the novices 'start off wanting to make a difference and wanting to be a detective... but they just try to get out of there as quick as they can'. There was some evidence to support that contention. It was noted that most of the new investigators said that they were planning to look for either promotion or a specialist role as soon as they were able. One already was enrolled on a fast-track promotion scheme that was likely to quickly take them out of the CID.
9. Reflecting on the demographic of the research sample, one of the key aims of the fast-track schemes was to increase the diversity of the detective workforce. One must always be cautious when looking to generalise from a small sample but viewing this group in isolation, the service's efforts delivered some successes in broadening both the investigatory skill set and its gender mix. It seems to have had less success in attracting people from visible ethnic minorities into the investigator role.

Common themes – all forces

10. There is a national shortage of mentors; particularly, adequately trained mentors, which reflects the lack of investigative experience across UK policing. Some mentors said that they did not really understand what was expected of them. Some of those who had received some training in mentoring felt that it had been cursory and limited, and it had not equipped them well enough for the role. In a few cases, inexperienced investigators were being mentored by others with just a few months more experience. In one force, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) was so short of experience that recently PIP2 accredited investigators immediately assumed mentoring roles. Some willingly took on the role; others were 'volunteered' for it.
11. Lack of experience and the attrition of investigators in the mainstream were themes that repeatedly were raised by research participants. In some forces, the attrition rate for new investigators has been extremely high. The main reasons stated by participants were that people did not know what they were walking into, and they were not ready for the 'awful things' that are a part of a detective's daily life; and 'the university stuff' added to the requirements to learn how to become an officer and to learn how to be a detective. The view that new investigators were being asked to do too much, in too short a space of time, was shared by both novice and experienced investigators.
12. Participants said that the role is unattractive to uniformed officers because of high workloads, poor work/life balance, the pay differential, and the added responsibility of the role. In some forces, individuals have been posted into CID and PVP roles without any objective assessment of their suitability for them.
13. Participants from every force said that their workload was too high. Some felt that their workloads were unmanageable and that contributed to the attrition of staff. In many cases, it also led to the minimum level of investigation being carried out by investigators. It is well known that high workloads are leading to elevated levels of stress with obvious implications for staff welfare but the extent to which they are limiting the quality of investigations and the service to victims also should be acknowledged. As should investigators' frustration with not being able to do their best for victims in every case, which of course only adds to their stress.
14. Pay and allowances. There is widespread feeling among investigators that they are paid less for doing more than colleagues in other departments. The issue of a clothing allowance was raised repeatedly. Investigators said that they were disadvantaged when compared to their uniformed colleagues who are supplied with clothing and other kit at forces' expense. This report cannot make the link between the lack of a clothing allowance and investigators' appearance empirically, but the research team did see in their fieldwork that in most of the research sites, officers' standard manner of dress was 'casual.'
15. Some participants felt that the plugging of gaps with PSIs was ineffective because the latter could not be obliged to work shifts, public holidays, and so on. However, participants also commented on the fact that many sworn officers were unwilling to make the kind of commitment to their jobs that once was the norm in detective work. Participants in different forces talked about colleagues wanting to go home at 4 o'clock and not taking their work

seriously enough (examples provided were of investigators turning up late for work and refusing to do essential overtime).

16. PSI participants were among the more knowledgeable and experienced of the staff interviewed. All were qualified to PIP2. In one case, the PSI was by far the most experienced investigator in their office. Each PSI said that they would consider becoming a sworn officer but to do so would mean taking a substantial cut in pay; that they could not afford because of their existing financial commitments. To date, forces had been unwilling to make up the difference between what they were being paid as PSIs and what they would be paid as entry level detectives.
17. A formidable team ethic is the foundation of business success. The research team found only weak evidence of it in the CID. That was manifest not only in the unwillingness of individuals to make personal sacrifices but also in the lack of communication between team members. In one CID office, one sub-team had had a team meeting only once in a two-year period. Partly, that might be explained by the fact that since COVID, and the brigading of investigators in investigation centres, individuals spend some of their working week, effectively, working from home (WFH); usually at their local station. However, participants said that team meetings were unwelcome to many because of the blame culture that is endemic in policing. It was research participants' view that many investigators were inexperienced and lacked confidence and they were reluctant to share experiences with colleagues because they feared they could be viewed in a negative light.
18. There is a growing divide between different elements of the service. For example, participants felt that their separation from R&P and Custody (both physically and in terms of shift patterns) was problematic. Interactions with R&P and Custody now always are transactional; opportunities to socialise together, even incidentally, are extremely limited and the opportunity to develop productive, professional, and empathetic working relationships has been reduced significantly.
19. Participants said there was a blurring of the lines between PIP1 and PIP2. PIP2 investigators believed that they spent too much time on PIP1 level investigations. They said that was inefficient. A minority view was that the CID is used as a dumping ground for work that others find too difficult or simply prefer to pass on. During the fieldwork for this study, one of the forces that took part in this study introduced measures to address the PIP1/PIP2 issue. The research team is unable to comment on the outcome of that initiative.
20. The importance of the handover of an investigation from R&P was discussed by several participants who said that standards vary and need to improve. Participants said they recognised that the former also are under huge pressure because of their workload but also expressed the view that R&P officers have become deskilled; many lack even basic investigative skills.
21. Investigator training received mixed reviews. Participants liked the classroom-based learning elements of it; new detectives made disparaging comments on the exam. Many who had achieved PIP2 accreditation, felt that the portfolio element had been a tick box exercise that had added little to their learning.

22. Finally, for many readers it may be a statement of the obvious, but it is worth noting here that investigators in specialist roles have more experience and belong to more cohesive and motivated teams than their colleagues in main CID or PVP. The former can maintain a task focus; they are better supported and simply do not experience the same pressures as their peers in the mainstream. It is unsurprising that investigators in the mainstream aspire to those roles.

Summary of investigators' needs

23. While the researchers recognise the service's challenges in meeting these needs, based on participants' responses in this study, can be explained simply. CID and PVP departments need either more staff or less work.
24. Employing more staff will provide greater resilience and reduce the risk that forces currently are carrying. Individuals employed in those departments want less administration and bureaucracy surrounding their work.
25. Effective workload management has proved to be an extraordinarily difficult undertaking, but investigators need lighter workloads if the quality of service to victims and communities is to improve. Investigators must have more time to devote to individual cases so that they can provide the excellent service that individuals, groups, and communities expect.
26. Investigators want to feel valued and recognised for the work they do. In part, that means paying them as much as their uniformed colleagues in equivalent ranks, but they do not measure recognition and value solely in financial terms. They also need more peer, mentor, and wellbeing support. Many want more time for professional development. Currently, even when time is set aside for training or development activities they often are cancelled at short notice because of operational needs.

Areas for future research

27. In summary, the research confirmed much of what already is known about the challenges faced by police investigators, but its strengths are that it is grounded in empiricism, and it achieved the researchers' aims of identifying avenues for future research. These were:
- **Recruitment and retention**
 - New investigators
 - Do they really understand what the role entails and what is expected of them?
 - Why hasn't the service achieved its aim of diversifying the investigative workforce by recruiting from minority groups?
 - How can the investigator role be made more attractive to officers in other departments?
 - How effective are current retention policies?
 - **Workload**
 - Are current workloads sustainable?
 - Can workloads be better matched to investigative resources?
 - What are the short, medium, and long-term effects of high workloads on staff health and wellbeing?
 - **Mentoring**

- Do mentors have the skills and experiential knowledge they need to perform the role?
 - What training do mentors receive; how is it accredited/assessed?
 - How are mentors' caseloads managed to allow them to meet novice investigators' needs?
- **Culture**
 - what are the benefits and disbenefits of the centralisation of the detective force?
 - what is the impact of WFH policies on the quality of investigations?
 - what has been the impact of the distancing of investigators from other actors (such as R&P and Custody) in the investigative process?
 - what has been the impact of distancing investigators from communities (by moving them from local stations to investigation centres)?
 - What has been the impact on investigations of the diminishing of officers' sense of shared mission and '*Esprit de Corps*' evidenced in this study?
- **Pay & allowances**
 - To what extent can/should the pay gap (between detectives and other staff) be made up?
 - How can the issue of investigators' pay be resolved so that when PSIs become sworn officers, they are not financially disadvantaged?
 - Why is clothing allowance – removed from detectives 20 years ago – become a totem for what many investigators perceive as the unfair treatment of them?
- **Professional development**
 - Is the workplace assessment element of detective training fit for purpose?
 - What does the PIP2 portfolio deliver beyond compliance?
 - Do investigators' inputs justify the outputs?
 - Is there a system of benchmarking investigative standards nationally, and if it exists, is it sufficiently robust?
 - Is there a need for a more realistic assessment of investigators' needs (one that draws upon Maslow's hierarchy of needs)?
 - does the seeming inability of the service to satisfy investigators' basic needs limit forces' ability to move forward with developing the investigative workforce and delivering an excellent service to victims?