

POLICE SPECIALISM IN ENGLAND AND WALES

AN EXPLORATORY REVIEW

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SUMMARY

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RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In most fields, **specialism** is perceived as **superior** to generalist approaches which are associated with lower levels of career prestige, achievements and knowledge (Misky et al., 2022).

Simultaneously, specialist executive skills are expected by most companies and employers as non-negotiable and **basic requirements** for being hired in the first place (Schelfhauert & Crittenden, 2005).

Research hints that **forced** specialisation can have **negative effects** on wellbeing and performance (De Hert, 2020; Dias Carvalho & da Palma, 2018).

Absence of general specialism models = **lack of evidence-based practice** on how (and if) specialism should be improved nationally and through the development of which characteristics (Fulton, 2021; Vaughan et al., 2021).

TWO CONTRASTING POSITIONS

(NONE OF WHICH DIRECTLY MENTIONS SPECIALISM!)

Clearer roles understanding = better case handling and increased wellbeing (e.g., lower levels of stress and burnout) (Fulambarker, 2020)

“The single greatest factor reducing stress in the workplace was the presence of **skilled assistance**” (Kluger et al., 2003)

Repeated exposure to the same crime/routine = negative impact on wellbeing and burnout (MacEachern et al., 2018)

Some **crime types** show higher risk (e.g., sex offences, especially against children) (Foley & Massey, 2020)

POLICE SPECIALISM

- Police specialism includes tasks that go **beyond traditional day-to-day duties** of a police officer and that are used to appropriately handle specific types of crimes, victims, and perpetrators (Ministry of Defence, 2014).
- At least one among the following elements ‘**specialist units, specialist training** and/or **specialist roles**’ is incorporated in police work practice and/or reflected in force-specific organisational needs.
- **Specialism ≠ Professionalism**. Holdaway (2017): the self-identification of officers with specialism is linked to professional status and belonging, rather than measurable, acquired, specialised skills and knowledge.
- **Increased research focus on police specialism**, as emerging needs for further professionalisation have been clashing with the objective capacity of police forces in England and Wales -> diluted expertise and duplicated resources (Redgrave et al., 2022).

THE RESEARCH

STRAND 1:

Systematic Literature Review:

1. **All-time** published material on specialism
2. Consulted **five ProQuest databases** (Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts (ASSIA); Criminal Justice Database; UK (United Kingdom) & Ireland Database; Psychology Database; Sociology Database) + **Grey Literature**.
3. Limited to **England and Wales** only.
4. Total of **57** articles/reports included.

STRAND 2:

Short Survey for Police Officers:

1. Targeted **high ranking roles** across all forces in England and Wales.
2. **Pilot investigation** ‘quality over quantity’ aim - discover more non-academic knowledge of specialism directly from police representatives.
3. Collected original contributions (open-ended questions) from **10** participants, dealing with different crime specialisations across different units.

TOPICS OF INTEREST

- Number (if any) and type of **specialist units**, and specialist **roles** available in the force.
- Identification to **policy documents** for past and/or present specialist units and roles.
- Force **definition of specialism**.
- More specific questions for **specialist training attendance** rate e.g., trained under Specialist Sexual Assault Investigators Development Programmes (SSAIDP).
- Identified **advantages** and **barriers** to the implementation of specialist units and specialist knowledge within the force.

FIVE IDENTIFIED THEMES

(Strand 1 + Strand 2)

Themes	Description	Sub-themes
Inherent Characteristics of Specialist Units	<i>Common patterns highlighted across different specialist units about the reason why they were instituted and their impact</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Common Origin and Rationale• Lack of Consistent Evidence-Based Practice
External Contributors to Specialism	<i>The theme explores the impact of external factors, to the institution and development of specialism</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Organisational Support Impacts Specialism• Impact of Conflicting Research on Specialism
Training and Development	<i>Identification of projected training needs and results that are implicated in specialism</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Type and Delivery of Training Matters• Training Unavailable Despite Positive Impact
Challenges to the Implementation of Specialism	<i>Encountered or predicted obstacles of implementing specialism in a policing context</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of Resources• Fear of Elitism
Advantages of Specialism	<i>Measured or presumed benefits related to specialism in a policing context</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased Competence• Wellbeing: Protective Factor• Better Cooperation

1.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SPECIALIST UNITS

- **Common origin:** socio-political disruption that simultaneously posed, to an extent or another, a risk for the public paired with the inability of police personnel to deal with the emerging threat promptly and effectively.
- Some exceptions apply: e.g., **sex offences**.
- The **request for specialist skills**, a supported unit and better preparation mostly came directly from the police officers – who recognised that without specialisation, they would have not been prepared enough for future manifestations of the same disruptions.
- **Lack of Evidence-Based Practice** applied to the development of police specialist units in England and Wales → specialism's creation and dismantling is not driven by evidence.

2.

EXTERNAL
CONTRIBUTORS
TO SPECIALISM

- **Organisational Support Impacts Specialism** → e.g., workload on a single officer or team; level of managerial and organisational support received, influence of force-specific intrinsic policies, legislations, and procedures (Maguire et al., 2010).
- **Specialism is inferred** → unclear role expectations, excessive workload, and lack of adequate managerial support can all hinder performance and increase burnout levels (Wigert and Agrawal, 2018a)
- **Reliance on external specialists** is perceived more cost effective.
- **Conflicting evidence** on specialism has hindered its maximisation for some crime types → some units/roles are not protected nor prioritised by the police force and higher criminal justice (CJ) organisations.

3.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

- **Type and delivery of training matters** → contribute the effectiveness of knowledge retainment, officers' perceptions of their own competence, and role clarity.
- Access to resources with **no guidance** makes officers incapable of defining the implications and meaning of their specialist title, to the extent that they struggle to pinpoint where their strengths and limitations lie, because of lack of information provided by officers from higher ranks.
- Adequate **training is frequently unavailable** despite positive impact → officers are asked to **perform tasks they were not qualified to carry out**.
- → Need to make training and career development for police officers more skills-specific, evidence-based and specialised in the context of supportive work environments.

4.

CHALLENGES OF SPECIALISM IMPLEMENTATION

- **Lack of human resources** → e.g., officers' availability is withdrawn from planned, ordinary activities to allow specialist work to be conducted in a separate role or unit.
- **Financial constraints** → budget cuts and austerity measures.
- High job demands and lacking job resources – both human and financial – negatively contribute to job burnout among police officers, affecting their physical and mental health (Jenkins, 2023)
- **Fear** that specialism might = **elitism**: “behaviours creating a them and us culture we are better you are worse, we protect our own. This can feed into dangerous practices which have the potential to damage public confidence.”
- Elitist concerns mostly highlighted by surveyed officers, despite **no evidence** of this in England and Wales-based literature.

5.

ADVANTAGES OF SPECIALISM

- **Increased Competence** → potential to assist officers in better handling case-specific workload, increasing confidence in their roles, and increasing the efficacy of delivery outcomes that match national expectations.
- **Protective factor for Wellbeing** → only in contexts of positive work climate and organisational support.
- **Increased cooperation and satisfaction** within and outside the force → third party-agencies and partners seem impressed with the work conducted by specialist units, with overall perceived, although not measured, impacts on satisfaction levels, cooperation, and outcomes.
- Spalek's (2010) review of a specialised CTU highlighted that specialism equipped officers with more adequate experience, knowledge, and ability to deal with high-pressure situations; an implementation that increased officers' **wellbeing**, but also **trust and confidence in the police**.

IMPLICATIONS

This exploratory review of the literature of Police Specialism in England and Wales is **the first** since specialism's first development in the 80s when specialist branches were introduced with the main scope of fighting counter-terrorism prevention and royalty protection (Home Office, 1984).

It highlighted that the **structure, shape, and meaning of specialism** in policing has **evolved** to be more inclusive of crime types and, in some instances, to accommodate changes in culture, society, and technology. Research should, therefore, focus on the new ways specialism might evolve in the future.

Failure to **acknowledge the need for modernisation** within policing can negatively affect the support received from the public and hinder the legitimisation of police authority among the community (Loveday, 2008).

Investments in specialism cannot provide successful and measurable results without **organisational support**, enhanced **role clarity**, and access to **adequate resources**; but most especially without guidance from evidence-based practice.

IMPLICATIONS

The presence of specialist knowledge should not be inferred by virtue of belonging to a specialist police unit, and greater clarity is needed for both police officers and police personnel around expectations for specialisms (units, roles, training).

International research on specialist units and specialism showed that they can have a positive impact on policing efficacy, competence and outcomes. However, UK-based research on the topic is not developed enough.

The development of some forms of specialism e.g., that of sex offences, has been hindered over time (HMCPSI, 2007; IPCC, 2009; Rape Action Plan, 2002), with little to no practical progress being registered so far (McPhee et al., 2021; WAR, 2019).

To maximise the implementation of specialism, an overall modernisation of the structure of police forces and of organisational culture might be required. Without an overall restructure of how policing approaches specialism, it will be difficult to measure the impact of specialism (Silvestri, 2018).

WHAT'S NEXT?

The next stages of this PhD (*Study 2 and 3*) will look at:

- Understanding **why** the progress on specialist training, knowledge and units for rape and other sexual offences has been stalling; and what police officers think of this specific branch of specialism;
- Measuring any **potential differences within specialism** can be identified (e.g., by crime type and comparing officers working for specialist and non-specialist units);
- Identifying **any positive effects of specialism** on officers' perceived competence, wellbeing and cooperation;
- Drafting what specialism should look like in the **future**, according to both retired and serving police officers.

TO ACHIEVE THIS,
I NEED **YOUR** HELP



RESEARCH ON POLICE SPECIALISM PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

We are seeking **police officers' perspectives** on specialism. Specifically, we are interested in understanding your ideas of specialism, and any possible or registered impacts on wellbeing, work climate and skill development. We would also like to hear your perspective of what the public might expect of police officers working in specialist units, according to your experience.

Retired officers are also invited to take part.

Survey completion takes between 10 and 30 minutes
(*depending on how much you've got to share!*)

If you are interested, follow the link above or scan the QR code.



For any information about the research, please email a.barbin2@uos.ac.uk

THANK YOU!

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