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Police Specialism in England and Wales: An Exploratory Review

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Abstract

Purpose. There is a surprising lack of underpinning evidence relating to how police specialism is conceived and operationalised nationally. The study aimed to shed light on the development of specialism, adding valuable insights towards academic and police knowledge on the topic. **Methodology.** Exploratory research was conducted to draw evidence on police specialism in England and Wales according to publications in the literature and the first-hand accounts of high-ranking police officers. A total of 57 documents and 10 officers' accounts were thematically analysed. Five main themes have been identified, relating to the development, impact and barriers of specialist units, knowledge and training.

Findings. Socio-cultural, policy-based, and historical information that contributed to the development of specialism in the police in their contemporary form were highlighted. The conceptual triggers for the institution of most specialist units were disasters and modernisation. In both cases, police forces were faced with the inability of keeping up with emerging threats and criminal techniques developments. Some exceptions apply, with the specialism of sex offence investigations still being underdeveloped and underfunded. There is also evidence that specialism can impact on police efficacy, and that the specialist knowledge of officers working for within specialist units is frequently inferred – rather than measured.

Potential advantages and challenges of police specialism were reviewed, to understand what specialism looks like based on policing needs and concerns. **Originality.** This was the first study of its kind that investigated how police specialism is conceived, instituted, and prioritised in England and Wales.

Keywords: policing, police specialism, sex offences, specialism, specialist roles, specialist units.

Police Specialism in England and Wales: An Exploratory Review

Introduction

Conceptually, specialism encompasses a range of specific technical skills, knowledge, and abilities developed through experience or training (Gregory, 2009). Specialism is normatively associated with competence-based approaches that encourage specialist skills and knowledge development, rather than generalist principles (Leighninger, 1980; Prokopenko *et al.*, 2020). Both business and academic professionals have shown a preference for specialism, as opposed to generalism, fuelling an ongoing debate on which of the two is the most effective (Kelly *et al.*, 2011). Findings on public perception highlighted that specialism was associated with higher levels of career prestige in most professions (Misky *et al.*, 2022). Accordingly, Harrold *et al.* (1999, p.1) reported that specialist doctors were "more knowledgeable [...] and quicker to adopt new and effective treatments than generalists". While specialist skills are expected in most

work contexts as a basic requirement for being hired (Schelfhaudt and Crittenden, 2005), some concerns have been reported. According to De Hert (2020), forced specialisation negatively affects employees' wellbeing. Increased burnout levels in sports (Brenner et al., 2019), dentistry (Singh *et al.*, 2015), and among physicians were also registered, with the most detrimental effects being, however, linked to adverse occupational environments, rather than specialism *per se* (Bhui *et al.*, 2016; Howlet, 2019). Similarly, Wigert and Agrawal (2018), reported that lacking chances to showcase specialist skills in unsupportive workplaces also increased stress levels, perceived fatigue, and disengagement from the role.

Although research into specialism in criminal justice contexts is rare, the concept can be extended to policing (Higgins *et al.*, 2016). Specialist structures are routinely seen in policing as either *specialist units, specialist training, and/or specialist roles* incorporated in their work practice and reflected in force-specific organisational needs (Metropolitan Police, 2018). However, there is a dearth of evidence-based literature which explains what informs the development of these roles. According to the Ministry of Defence (2021), specialism includes any tasks that go beyond the traditional day-to-day duties of a police officer and are used to appropriately handle specific types of crimes, victims, and perpetrators where tailored support or expertise (such as interviewing vulnerable victims or children) may be required. Researchers have suggested that the goal of using specialism in policing would be to better equip staff to investigate crimes using their specialist knowledge, leading to more effective criminal justice outcomes, improve officers' resilience and wellbeing, and rely less on external third-party experts (Dalton *et al.*, 2022; Lorey and Fegert, 2021; Runhovde, 2021). Positive association have been registered between having specialised units and increases in successful use of investigative intelligence and greater team capabilities (Strom, 2017; Weisburd and Lum, 2005). However, officers belonging to a specialised violent crime unit in the US were shown to exert greater force against suspects during arrests than officers from non-specialised units (Gaub *et al.*, 2021), suggesting the effects of specialism may be negative as well as positive.

Concerningly, what differentiates and defines types of police specialism in practice is not always obvious. For instance, most police officers working above their General Policing Duties might tend to consider themselves as 'specialists' – with specialism often wrongly intended as 'professionalism'. Holdaway (2017) reported that the self-identification of officers with specialism has much more to do with professional status and belonging than it has to do with measurable specialist skills and knowledge. Similarly, Fournier (1999) suggests in work contexts that have a component of authority, professionalism is intertwined with identity, as individuals base their competence on abstract ideals of what it means to belong to a given occupational domain. The absence of guidance on police specialism in England and Wales can hinder the identity,

wellbeing, and perceived competence of officers, with subsequent negative effects on their perception of specialism.

The current review

Even though some specialist units and specialist roles are already established in England and Wales, recent policy developments have required law enforcement members to become even more specialised (NCA, no date). This indicates a perception that specialism can be beneficial within policing and drive towards higher quality skills development for police officers (Baroness Casey, 2023). Considering this, the mixed findings around the effects of specialism on policing, and the lack of clarity on how police specialism is defined, it seemed appropriate to conduct an exploratory review of the literature and draw on officers' views, into specialism in policing in England and Wales. The [blinded for revision] Ethics Committee granted ethical approval to the research on the 21st of April 2023.

Method

The review comprised two separate strands. The first strand focused on the identification of academic articles that mentioned police specialism. Data collection involved four stages: the creation of keywords, or search strings; an initial screening for relevant academic articles and grey literature; full-text reviews of selected articles and final selection; and identification of main themes. The selected keywords included 'policing', 'specialism', 'specialist unit', 'specialist knowledge', 'specialist crime', 'police specialist', 'specialist role' 'advantages OR barriers OR limits' and 'police specialism'. Academic papers were sourced from five databases: Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts (ASSIA), Criminal Justice Database, UK & Ireland Database, Psychology Database, and Sociology Database. Google Scholar was used to capture grey literature documents. Articles that were not UK-based, that were not in English, or that were not accessible, were excluded. To be selected, the documents had to be centred on police specialism (any crime), refer to research conducted in England and Wales only, and have been peer-reviewed. No restrictions based on the year of publication were applied.

ProQuest databases provided 3,016 hits, of which 334 were included in the article screening stage. Google Scholar gave 236,000 hits, with the first 200 screened - in line with Haddaway *et al.* (2015). From the initial 534 articles, 57 papers passed the threshold for inclusion. Three main groups of publications were selected:

- Articles and/or reports that mentioned distinct types and characteristics of present/past specialist police units in England and Wales.
- Studies and/or research conducted on police specialism (e.g., opinion of specialist versus non-specialist police officers, or findings that relate to specialist units, knowledge, and training).

- Articles and/or studies that (implicitly or explicitly) discussed the advantages and disadvantages of police specialism.

The second strand consisted of a request for information sent to high-ranking police officers from 43 forces in England and Wales. The request was advertised on social media and shared over email, to gather force-specific policing insights, legislation, and historical reports on the development of specialism. A total of 12 questions were included, enquiring about definitions and presence of specialist units, training and roles, as well as positive and negative experiences of specialism as highlighted in their police force. Responses could be provided either directly over email or using an anonymous *QuestionPro* survey link. Ten police officers, with a minimum of 20 years' experience in their role, responded. Demographic information, aside from years in the role and rank, was not collected to protect anonymity.

Findings from the two strands of research were jointly thematically analysed. From the combination of academic literature and officer insights gathered through the survey link or shared over email (N = 67), five main themes and eleven sub-themes were identified (see **Figure 1**).

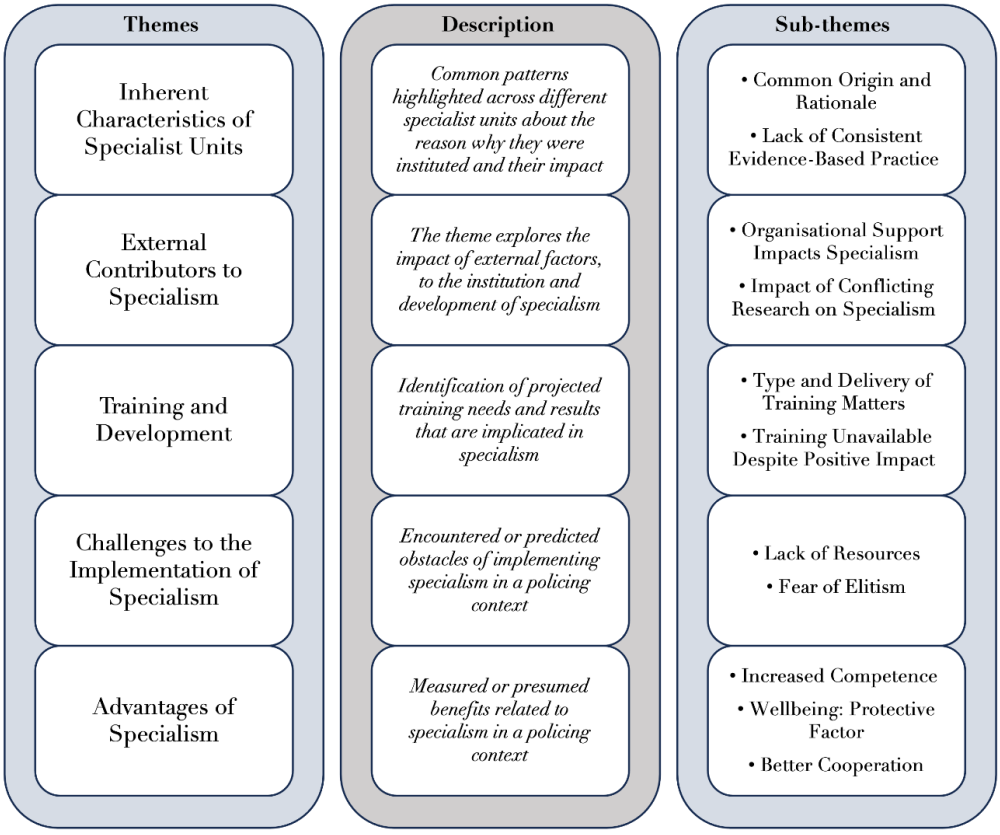

Figure 1. *Description of themes and sub-themes identified from the analysis of the 67 documents/insights.*

Results

Characteristics of Specialist Units

Most information related to the development of specific specialist police units in England and Wales. This theme summarises identified patterns and characteristics associated with their creation.

Common Origin and Rationale

When looking back at the origins of specialism in policing, a Home Office report (1984) indicates how specialist units were first instituted to protect the Queen's and royal family as well as disrupt crime commissions from international terrorist groups in Great Britain. The Police Foundation (2019) underlined that from their initial creation as specialist branches, a range of specialist police units have either been introduced and dismantled, but most especially shaped to reflect emerging priorities and necessities of higher institutions. Thus, suggesting that socio-cultural and political influences might act as important moderators in the creation and evolution of new branches of specialism. In agreement, Hailand and Shelley (1992) reported that changes within policing are mostly triggered by a failure to acknowledge the needs for modernisation and progress, with detrimental effects on police capacity, public support and the legitimisation of police authority (Loveday, 2008). For instance, newly developed digital tactics used by perpetrators to commit cybercrimes, paired with the inability of police forces to adequately prevent cyber-attacks, resulted in policing investment into specialist skills and technologies (Hunton, 2009; Wall, 2007). According to the officers, these changes can be problematic as they rarely consider officers' needs and are often rushed, forcing not adequately trained officers to be "drawn from traditional roles […] and the force to quickly reorganise its structures around supporting county lines operations and safeguarding, leading to other areas of policing to being neglected.".

Nohrstedt (2022) reported how most core changes within social policies are normally preceded by a disaster, or major event, widely impacting the public, and specialism within policing can equally be influenced by single or notable events. For instance, between April and September 2018, in London only, victims of cybercrime attacks lost around £35 million pounds (Woollacott, 2019). As a result, dedicated police cybercrime units were instituted for all police forces, with seven million pounds allocated for specialism development (The Police Foundation, 2022). Similarly, Counter Terrorist Units (CTUs) were kickstarted by the '7th of July bombings' in the early 2000s, and the incident was later defined as unprecedent case of home-grown terrorism (BBC News, 2006). Other specialist units like Firearms, Road Police, and Gang Crime also have common origins (CPS, 2022; Hickey, 2019; Smith, 2019; The Guardian, 2014).

Interestingly, these factors do not seem to affect policing specialism equally. For instance, despite increased public awareness, multiple serious incidents, and various government reviews, no drastic change in specialism for sex offences has yet occurred (IPCC, 2009), even with express calls for structural and organisational change (Dame Angiolini DBE, 2015). It appears that the policing response to sex crimes is still underwhelming and disconnected, due (in part) to the challenges in recruiting police personnel for specialist units specifically, in the lack of a strong national framework (Jamel *et al.*, 2008; WAR, 2019). Moreover, the 2008 recession led to unprecedented cuts to central funding for police institutions, resulting in an overall reorganisation of the few sex offence teams instituted (e.g., Sapphire) (Facchetti, 2023). As a result, since the early 00s, less than 40% of police forces have dedicated units for this crime type – most revolving around child abuse and domestic violence (Siddique, 2021).

Lack of Consistent Evidence-Based Practice

Evidence-based practice (EBP) should be an important driving force for the implementation of specialism in England and Wales (Sherman, 2013). The influence of socio-political needs and events means, however, the introduction, dismantling, and reduction of specialist units is rarely the result of evidence-based recommendations, with officers highlighting contradictions in how the government sees specialism based on their agenda: "specialist resources are argued to provide greater efficiency savings, but when it suits [they] can be argued to be too expensive" *(Officer 4*). Recent attempts of EBP in policing specialism included the development of an operational framework for specialist CTUs, with an HM Government report (2018, p.28), reporting that "complex specialist skills are needed to simultaneously stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism, stop terrorist attacks, strengthen our protection against a terrorist attack and mitigate [its] impact". Despite this, most of the subsequent research revolved around public perceptions of CTUs, with Power *et al.* (2016) identifying a positive association between the public's feeling of safety and reassurance against terrorist attacks and the perceived competence of specialist police officers and teams dealing with terrorism. This neglects, however, how specialism may, for instance, impact on the efficiency of police officers (Spalek, 2010). Notably, some of the components of the CTU frameworks, especially 'prevent', has attracted substantial criticism from the government and is deemed to be a policy that lacks much-needed evidence-based foundations, with most of the success associated to it being largely speculative (Shawcross, 2023).

External Contributors to Specialism

The review found some common contributors to the effectiveness of specialism. From the evidence gathered through the survey responses and UK-based literature, both the lack of organisational support and

the absence of coherent research results on specialism are shown to hinder the maximisation of police specialism.

Organisational Support Affects Specialism

Maguire *et al*. (2010) suggested that organisational factors are moderators of specialism and can aid officers in achieving successful investigative outcomes. These factors include workload, managerial support, and organisational support, as well as the influence of force-specific policies, legislations, and procedures. Supporting this, some officers stressed in their response to the survey how the successful implementation of specialism is driven mostly by adequate organisational support and resources, and managerial consideration of local needs and challenges (*Officer 6)*. However, investments in specialism are not always based on police officers' and forces' needs but are more likely to be arbitrarily instituted, following a fictitious balance of advantages and costs (*Officer 1*). This also means that police forces might not have enough time to put adequate organisational support in place when further specialisation is requested or enforced. For instance, due to external demands, forces might be asked to perform in a way that is in line with the level of specialism requested, without considering the influence of budget cuts on the implementation of adequate training (House of Commons, 2018; Mendel *et al.*, 2017). Evidencing this, Virta (2002) indicated that the implementation of change within police forces is frequently hindered by the fact that officers are assigned specialist roles without the allocation of the necessary organisational resources, forcing police personnel to quickly adapt to new requests without having had time to undergo training and development. Surveyed officers also stressed that joining specialist units does not always translate into feeling more competent or better supported. Accordingly, the literature suggests that the practical and mental toll on police personnel is rarely considered when organisational change is implemented, with officers' wellbeing put under strain (Metropolitan Police, 2022).

Impact of Conflicting Research on Specialism's Efficacy

The early 2000s were characterised by important reviews for the development of police investigations, in light of a slow but steady increased demand for tailored skills and capability for investigating offences like economic-related crime, terrorism, and cybersecurity (King & Doig, 2016; Leicester Police, 2023). Some experts at the time argued that for certain types of fraud, the use of police personnel might have been excessive or wasted, so some of the investigative power was transferred to non-police agencies instead (Button, 2021). Although the findings were not validated, the message that passed indirectly impacted the interest of police officers to work for specialist fraud units in the first place and created prejudice around specialist roles. Two decades later, Skidmore *et al.* (2020, pp.7-8) reported that "the majority [of police officers] (N = 281, 81%) agreed that policing fraud requires a different set of skills to other crimes and a

similar proportion, felt that it should be dealt with by specialists (N = 300, 86%)", although this was never quantitatively measured. Similarly, despite the glorification of CTUs, there is no evidence that they function better than other specialist units, yet they continue to receive funding for specialism development, technologies, and training (HM Government, 2018; NPCC *et al.*, 2019). Although investments in police specialism can transcend, for some crime types, suggestions in favour or against its implementation, for other crime types (e.g., sex offences) conflicting research on specialism has contributed to hindering potential successful outcomes. Dalton *et al.* (2022, p.249) pinpointed, that "specialist policing of RASSO can improve the investigative process on several levels […] from interviewing and evidence collection, better engagement with victims, better officer wellbeing, and overall improved policing outcomes". Accordingly, HMICFRS (2019) mentioned that specialist knowledge and training for police officers should be crucial for the investigation of sex offences. However, criminal justice organisations are also more likely to rely on external support, rather than investing in in-house specialism (Matthews, 2005). For instance, there is evidence of multi-agency and regional approaches being recommended for both fraud-related offences and economic crime (Button, 2021). Officers expressed concerns that relying on external specialists is rarely fruitful and that the collaboration between police forces and agencies does not work in the long term (*Officer 3*).

Training and Development

Some of the documents focused on specialist training and career development in policing. The following subthemes highlight how specialist training is perceived by experts and police officers.

Type and Delivery of Training Matters

Less than 10 years ago, the College of Policing enforced a review of the training material delivered to police officers, aimed at better quality career development packages and specialism developments, especially for high-risk offences (Robinson *et al.*, 2016). Since then, specialist training has been shown to increase operational understanding and make officers feel more competent in their roles (Martin, 2020). Interestingly, Chandan and Meakin (2016) reported that when specialist training was delivered by non-police experts (e.g., medical personnel, psychologists, etc.), officers were more likely to retain information compared with training delivered by police officers. In this sense, the type and delivery of training are additional elements that, alongside organisational change, can contribute to the effectiveness of specialist knowledge. Despite these promising findings, most training is currently delivered in-house and is "largely limited to 'on-the-job' experience, e-learning, and e-mail bulletins" (Ewin *et al.*, 2020, p.151), with courses lasting only a few days or registering low attendance. Data gathered through the survey highlighted that although specialist training could increase officers' competence, the training objectives and goals are not

always clear. Agreeing, Loveday (2017) highlighted that even when access to specialist training is ensured, most officers struggle to define the implications of their specialist title, strengths and limitations, and this has been linked with a lack of guidance from higher-ranking officers. Officers also reported that the pressure to develop and maintain specialist skills often surpasses practical force, workload, and time capabilities.

Training Unavailable Despite Positive Impact

While training has been shown to improve practice in several areas of policing (Davies *et al*., 1998; McLean *et al*., 2022), it is not always available to officers, leaving them underqualified in roles where specialist knowledge and expertise are required (Dalton *et al.*, 2022; Mozova, 2019; O'Neill, 2019). Unfortunately, officers also reported that training opportunities are not always advertised, and when they are, high caseloads and other job-related constraints hinder participation.

Further, when training is available, the maintenance of said training is not always satisfactory. Daly (2004, p.5) found that although the officers' "initial probationary training was satisfactory […] subsequent training was insufficient to keep them updated about new legislation and operational developments in police work. This was particularly true for officers in specialist units, who felt that advanced training opportunities were too little and too late". Taken as a whole, this suggests the forces' inability to either provide training, create the space to take the training or give officers the opportunity to refresh specialist knowledge, especially since the cuts enforced during the austerity period (Turnbull and Wass, 2015).

Challenges to the Implementation of Specialism

According to some of the officers and evidence from the literature, there are some key issues associated with the institution of specialist units, regardless of the type of crime investigated. Two are reported below:

Lack of Resources

A common dominator within policing is that financial cuts are often prioritised at the expense of resources, capability and skill development (King and Doig, 2016; UK Parliament, 2018). The combination of these budget cuts and the increasing pressure on officers to be more and more specialised have led to challenges in hiring and retaining officers (Ayling *et al.* 2006). Further, there appears to be a disparity between government expectations and staff capability (Furnell *et al.*, 2017), with survey data pointing out that oftentimes specialism is not incentivised as a separated career path, but mostly takes the shape of side roles that remove officers from ordinary duties, with a resulting impact on the team members that are left behind (*Officer 3*). Police officers are moved around within roles and units, to save money, rather than retaining officers in their non-specialist roles and hiring new officers for specialist units (or vice-versa). As a result,

officers' availability is withdrawn from planned activities to allow specialist work to be conducted in a separate role or unit (Mendel *et al*., 2017). This has negative effects on wellbeing, specifically for crime types and units that are renowned for stressful and long working patterns (Caruso, 2014), with high job demands and lack of resources contributing to officers' burnout and performance hindrance (Jenkins, 2023). For Gannon and Doig (2010), diminished policing resources have implications for the effectiveness of prevention strategies and negatively affect specialism. Appropriately relying on the development of police specialism could assist officers and organisations in making more cost-effective decisions.

Fear of Elitism

Some of the officers who completed the survey indicated that assigning labels of specialism without adequate guidance and support might result in unwanted elitist attitudes and behaviours. More specifically, one of them expressed the fear that uncontrolled elitism can feed into dangerous practices that can further negatively impact police image, as well as create a culture of "we are better, you are worse" (*Officer 7*). Sunahara (2002) reported how elitism originating from belonging to a specialist police unit could contribute to increased claims of superiority, privilege, and entitlement in officers who display anger issues and unsolved job-related frustrations. It is worth noting, however, that Sunahara's (2002) study did not specifically focus on the influence of specialism, but rather on the fact that external variables and beliefs can make some officers more likely than others to act in unethical ways. For McManus (1997), elitism can only thrive in an organisational context where the perception of role, rank, usefulness, and belonging are distributed unequally across the police force, and more research is required to understand the links between elitism (as well as the perception of elitism), and the various aspects of specialism. Similarly, in Germany, modifications of policing organisational structures – which saw the elimination of lower ranks and the recruitment of officers at higher ranks from their first year of employment – seem to have increased the likelihood of elitism among police officials (Das & Palmiotto, 2004). Despite this, there is no evidence that these beliefs are the direct result of specialism or rather additional co-occurring organisational, cultural, and force-specific or role-dependant factors. This reinforces the idea, however, that some police groups might be more likely than others to display elitist-like features and behaviours. In line with this, although not discussed in the form of elitism in relationship with specialism per se, past and ongoing discourses on police culture have challenged regulatory frameworks that support sexism, bigotry, corruption, and institutional racism (Harper, 2023; Loftus, 2012). Recent insights from Baroness Casey (2023, p.13) reported as part of an independent review of Metropolitan Police's work, that one specific specialist team that employed both Carrick and Couzins displayed "one of the worst cultures, behaviours and practices have been found in specialist firearms units, where standards and accountability should be at their absolute highest." While elitism was not discussed as part of the review, insights from broader organisational policing concerns are certainly helpful in interpreting the findings of this study.

Advantages of Specialism

Three specific advantages to specialism were identified: higher perceived competence in their role, better wellbeing, and greater team cooperation.

Increased Role Competence

Very few papers have focused on how or whether specialism can improve competence in a policing context, and most evidence comes from international publications (Lemaire, 2016). For instance, Runhovde (2021) reported that specialising in art theft investigations has been shown to improve officers' competence in handling such crimes. While the evidence reviewing whether specialism *actually* affects competence is scarce, officers indicated that regardless of the crime considered, they felt specialism could equip police personnel with information that can make them better at their job, enhancing "competence, experience, tactical awareness and capacity" (*Officer 4*). This belief is supported by some authors who suggest that positive outcomes related to *perceived* competence have been registered since the introduction of specialisms (Farrell and Buckley, 1999; Martin *et al.*, 2017), such as officers feeling more prepared when interviewing crime victims and perpetrators (College of Policing, 2021; Turgoose *et al.*, 2017).

Wellbeing: Specialism as a Protective Factor

Police staff are a high-risk group for the development of mental health concerns, whose symptoms are often overlooked (Van der Velden et al., 2013). Officers who completed the survey reported that specialism could improve officers' wellbeing, leading to an overall better policing response. Agreeing, Spalek (2010) mentioned how officers working in CTUs reported perceived increases in wellbeing quality since the introduction of specialisms. Similarly, according to international research on domestic violence (DV), specialist police personnel had better coping mechanisms for dealing with the stress resulting from exposure to trauma when investigating DV reports (Lu *et al.*, 2023). This finding is important as DV and RASSO specialised officers have also been found to experience higher levels of secondary traumatic stress and burnout (Lu *et al.*, 2023; Sondhi et al., 2023). Appropriate investments in specialism might, therefore, be beneficial for crime types that have a distressing or traumatic component, acting as a protection mechanism for wellbeing (Author et al. [blinded for review], 2024).

Better Cooperation

Implementing specialist units has led to improved cooperation within and outside the police force, including increased support in public engagement, problem-solving, and organisational transformations (Jiang *et al.*,

2022). Namgung (2013) also reported how specialism influenced the engagement and involvement of regular police officers with volunteer Special Constables, leading to more positive relationships and integration within the police force. Similarly, Van Staden and Lawrence (2010) mentioned that specialist units contributed to maintaining more positive interactions with the CPS. In addition to this, third-party agencies and partners seem to be impressed with the work conducted by specialist units, with overall perceived, although not measured, impacts on satisfaction levels, cooperation, and outcomes (*Officer 8*). More specifically, *Officer 4* highlighted how "specialist units most certainly deliver a positive influence in the support of more generalised policing teams, investigative, victim, and community outcomes. The increased scrutiny and governance of specialist units ensures national standards and accreditations are delivered".

Discussion

This exploratory review of police specialism in England and Wales is the first since specialism's conceptualisation changed in the 1980s, when specialist branches were introduced for counterterrorism prevention and royalty protection (Home Office, 1984). For most crime types, specialist units have a common origin: usually a response to new threats and pressures to cope with society's modernisation (Weston, 2009). In this sense, the creation of specialist units is rarely associated with officers' needs or evidence-based research, and notably, there seem to be some offence types which are 'specialism resistant', with a lack of priority given to the specialist investigation of these crimes despite an acknowledged need for specialist knowledge. Overall, research has yet to shed light on understanding why the progress on specialist training, knowledge, and units for sexual offences has been stalling. The need for police specialism for most crime types has also been inferred rather than measured, and its purpose taken for granted. As a result, police officers voiced a lack of clarity around how specialism is defined, contextualised, or developed within each police force, and this is believed to have negative consequences on role and career path, alongside unrealistic performance expectations and excessive workload (Wigert and Agrawal, 2018). Although the benefits of specialism for officers based in England and Wales are rarely measured through evidence-based practice, it seems that specialist units that cannot keep up with demand are likely to be terminated, even if no support to cope with said demand was provided. Police officers in both specialist and non-specialist units are subsequently expected to be "specialists" but given no guidance from higher-ranking colleagues on how to maximise their specialist skills, with training deemed unavailable or inadequate (Daly, 2004). The data also highlighted how specialist units, forces, and other members of the criminal justice frequently infer specialist knowledge by virtue of belonging to a specialist unit, rather than through specialist skills development and clear specialism objectives. In this sense, being part of a

specialist unit or working as a police officer are often enough to be labelled *specialists*. This is a phenomenon that seems unique to policing, for which changes in required curricula and experience are still evolving.

Overall, despite officers' fear that specialism could lead to elitism, there is evidence that specialism could be advantageous for policing. Benefits include increased feelings of confidence during investigations (College of Policing, 2021; Murphy and Hine, 2018), as well as better case progression, victim service, and specialist support (Turgoose *et al.*, 2017; Van Staden and Lawrence 2010). However, the importance attributed to specialism from policy and legislation is not prioritised equally across crime types, and specialist units are not routinely protected. Silvestri (2018) stressed that an overall modernisation of the structure of police forces and organisational culture is needed, especially following policing scandals that have raised concerns on police professionalism (Singh, 2022). As a result, not only the topic investigated is incredibly relevant, but the research gaps highlight how more evidence is needed to measure specialism's benefits to policing in England and Wales.

Implications for practice and future research

The findings highlighted that police specialism is under-researched in England and Wales. What information does exist suggests that some offences are treated differently when it comes to the generation of specialist operations. For instance, sex offences have received significantly less attention compared to crimes like counterterrorism and fraud, despite recent recognition by the Metropolitan Police's commissioner Mark Rowley for funding for the investigation of violence against women and girls comparable to that for counterterrorism. The findings suggest that specialism might bring substantial advantages, but more research is required to ensure that specialist units can provide increased efficacy in terms of successful investigations, and do not come with undue downsides (or that these downsides are further reviewed to understand how they can be mitigated). Future studies should also focus on how specialism can be a protective factor for officers' wellbeing and how specialism for sex offences should develop in England and Wales as a cohesive tool to combat crime.

Conclusion

This exploratory review has highlighted how the lack of research on specialism has hindered the chances of measuring its impact, but also of designing successful and validated operational frameworks. Overall, the institution of specialism is mainly driven by socio-political disruptions and financial cost-gains evaluations, and some crime types, are perceived as less worthy of specialism-related investments. Amid this, police officers' wellbeing and capacity take a significant toll.

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