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Improving rape and serious sex offences investigations

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Abstract

Purpose: This special collection is devoted to some of the academic work underpinning Pillars 1 and 2 of Operation Soteria Bluestone (OSB). OSB was an academic police collaboration whose aim was to construct a co-produced evidence-based framework to improve the investigation of rape and serious sex offences (RASSO). This introductory paper provides a timeline for the phases of OSB collaboration, running from the pilot project through to the start of national implementation in England and Wales.

Design/methodology/approach: A mixed method approach was used. Data included: qualitative interviews with more than 100 police officers and prosecutors; the creation of a quantitative dataset, an anonymised, four-year sample of all sex offences ($n = 366,346$) recorded by five forces between January 2018 and December 2021; and two types of case reviews (312 in total) including qualitative and quantitative data.

Findings: We report research findings from phases of the project running from January 2021 to September 2023 involving five police forces.

Originality/value: Recommendations arising from this work regarding what investigative best practice in RASSO should look like are outlined and a visual summary provided. We conclude with observations about the way forward.

Keywords: policing, police investigations, Rape and Serious Sex Offences (RASSO), sex offences, police officers, evidence-based policing.

Operation Soteria Bluestone

Operation Soteria Bluestone (OSB) was a United Kingdom Home Office-funded programme designed to improve the investigation of rape and serious sex offences (RASSO) in England and Wales (Stanko, 2022). It was an academic police collaborative project combining police professional knowledge and practice underpinned by social science. The programme, designed by Katrin Hohl and Betsy Stanko, was comprised of six ‘pillars’ of work which resulted in the generation of a new National Operating Model (NOM) for investigating RASSO. The pillars of the NOM are 1) suspect focused investigations (led by Miranda Horvath); 2) disrupting repeat suspects (led by Kari Davies); 3) procedural justice approach to victim¹ engagement (led by Kelly Johnson and Olivia Smith); 4) learning, development, and officer wellbeing (led by Emma Williams); 5) data and performance (led by Jo Lovett); and 6) digital forensics (led by Tiggey May; Stanko, 2022).

OSB first ran from January 2021 to April 2021 and was originally called Project Bluestone in a pilot with Avon and Somerset Constabulary as the first ‘pathfinder’ force. At the end of this pilot, an introductory Special Issue was published in *International Criminology* (Davies & Horvath, 2022) to highlight the rationale for the project, the pillar approach to RASSO, and some initial findings. Between September 2021 and September 2022, the process used in Avon and Somerset Constabulary was replicated in four more police forces, to explore in more detail how RASSO investigations were being conducted in England and Wales. These findings and recommendations were reported in Stanko (2022). Between September 2022 and September 2023, (1) the academic teams continued to work with the original five forces and monitor changes whilst they implemented the recommendations, (2) a further 14 police forces were supported in conducting self-assessments of their own performance in RASSO, and (3) the NOM was developed to provide a new evidence-based blueprint for investigating RASSO including production of a variety of guidance documents and toolkits for use by investigators. In June 2023, the NOM was launched for implementation in all forces in England and Wales. See Figure 1 for a visual summary of the timeline for OSB.

¹ We use the term victim throughout this collection because it is the terminology used in policing. This is not to overlook or detract from the other terminology, such as survivor or victim-survivor, which may be preferred.

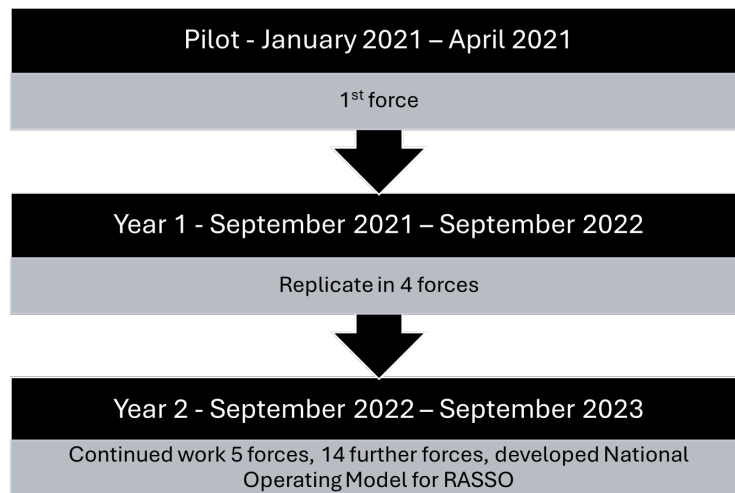


Figure 1. Visual summary of the Operation Soteria Timeline. Source: Authors own work

Work on OSB continues to present day with refining and implementing of the NOM. The papers in this collection provide insights into the way RASSO investigations are conducted across five police forces in England and Wales, based on the work conducted as part of Pillars 1 and 2 (and in one paper, supplemented with data from other Pillars; Walley et al., 2025). The data collection for Pillars 1 and 2 of OSB included:

- 1) qualitative interviews with more than 100 police officers and prosecutors (prosecutors were included because of the important liaison that should occur between officers and prosecutors during an investigation);
- 2) the creation of a quantitative dataset, an anonymised, four-year sample of all sex offences ($n = 366,346$) recorded by the five forces between January 2018 and December 2021, including information about the offences, suspects, and victims, and any named suspects' criminal history data (not limited to sex offences), obtained as far back as forces were able to provide them (which tended to be 1995); and
- 3) two types of case reviews (312 in total) including qualitative and quantitative data, and some with peer review commentary from officers of varying levels of seniority.

A more detailed account of all the elements of the data collection from Year 1 is available in Appendices 7 and 8 of Stanko (2022), and of the Year 2 data collection throughout this collection. Each paper in this collection has its own methodology; not all data collected were used for all papers presented here.

In this introductory paper, we start by summarising the key findings identified in the pilot and first year of the project, and the subsequent evidence-based recommendations made to forces

presented here as a visual summary which represents, from a Pillar 1 and 2 perspective, what investigative best practice in RASSO looks like (see Figure 2). The elements of the visual summary are then described and the links to the relevant papers in this collection are elucidated. Finally, we conclude and consider next steps providing some thoughts on the nature of work in this area, what good practice needs to look like moving forward and the importance of evaluation.

A summary of Pillar 1 and 2's key Year 1 findings

Exploring the extent to which RASSO investigations were suspect-focused or the attention paid to repeat offending are covered in detail in the Year 1 report (Stanko, 2022). In essence, findings from the pilot and Year 1 confirmed that RASSO investigations are not suspect-focused, rather, the primary focus was on the victim, and more specifically their perceived credibility. This echoes decades of results from international research (Sleath & Bull, 2017). Our data highlighted that many basic investigative functions, for example, checking suspects' criminal histories, were not completed routinely, with officers relying on victim credibility tests in the first instance which undermined formulation of effective strategies and the generation of actions to investigate the suspect. In part, we found this stemmed from a lack of specialist knowledge about sexual violence and sex offending. For the most part, in the forces in which we conducted our research, officers' approach to RASSO investigations was often procedural to the point of box checking with little or no critical reflection or thinking. This in turn was exacerbated by most investigations being conducted by inexperienced officers who received very little supervision, guidance, and support. There was little consideration given to repeat offending, nor was there much understanding as to how repeat offending could factor into core aspects of the investigation, such as the formulation of an effective investigative strategy or the appropriate safeguarding of those involved. It was also apparent that there was neither the knowledge nor strategic set up or capacity for officers to consider how to disrupt repeat sexual offending on a more long-term basis, beyond the confines of the immediate investigation. Overall, Pillars 1 and 2 found a substantial number of cases that were left to drift because of limited capacity and specialist knowledge, compounded by poor liaison and communication with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).

As a result of these findings, we made recommendations as to the core components of what investigative best practice from the perspective of Pillars 1 and 2 should look like in RASSO investigations, which we have visually represented for the purpose of this article in Figure 2. We suggested that officers should be working simultaneously on the three core elements of

investigations which are represented by the three main columns – investigation, disruption, and Police-Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) liaison. To the right of the column are three additional elements our data highlighted are essential for policing to consider – critical reflection, team working, and specialism. These are all relevant before, during, and after each investigation. Finally, the arrows around the core elements represent the other components of the investigation, which were not the focus of Pillars 1 and 2, but that are related to an effective investigation and can be transformative for ongoing and future investigations: engaging with victims, detailed and accurate data recording, supervision, and analyst and administrative support. As previously mentioned, OSB has a six-pillar approach, and these factors are covered in detail by our colleagues elsewhere (see e.g. Johnson et al., 2024; Lovett, Kelly & Gray, 2024; Lovett et al., 2023; Lovett et al., 2022; Maguire et al., 2024; Norman et al., 2022; Smith, Brooks-Hay & Johnson, 2024; Williams et al., 2022). It is also important to note that there is overlap with some of the Pillar 1 and 2 findings and that of other Pillars' work, such as the use of critical reflection also considered by Pillar 4.

Much of what we recommended is not new to policing. For instance, the idea of taking a suspect-focused approach to investigations is in the College of Policing's 2013 Authorised Professional Practice guidance on Investigations. What Figure 2 does do, however, is highlight the interrelated nature of the recommendations and the fact that actions taken in one aspect of the investigation can play a critical role in informing how other aspects of the investigation are then carried out.

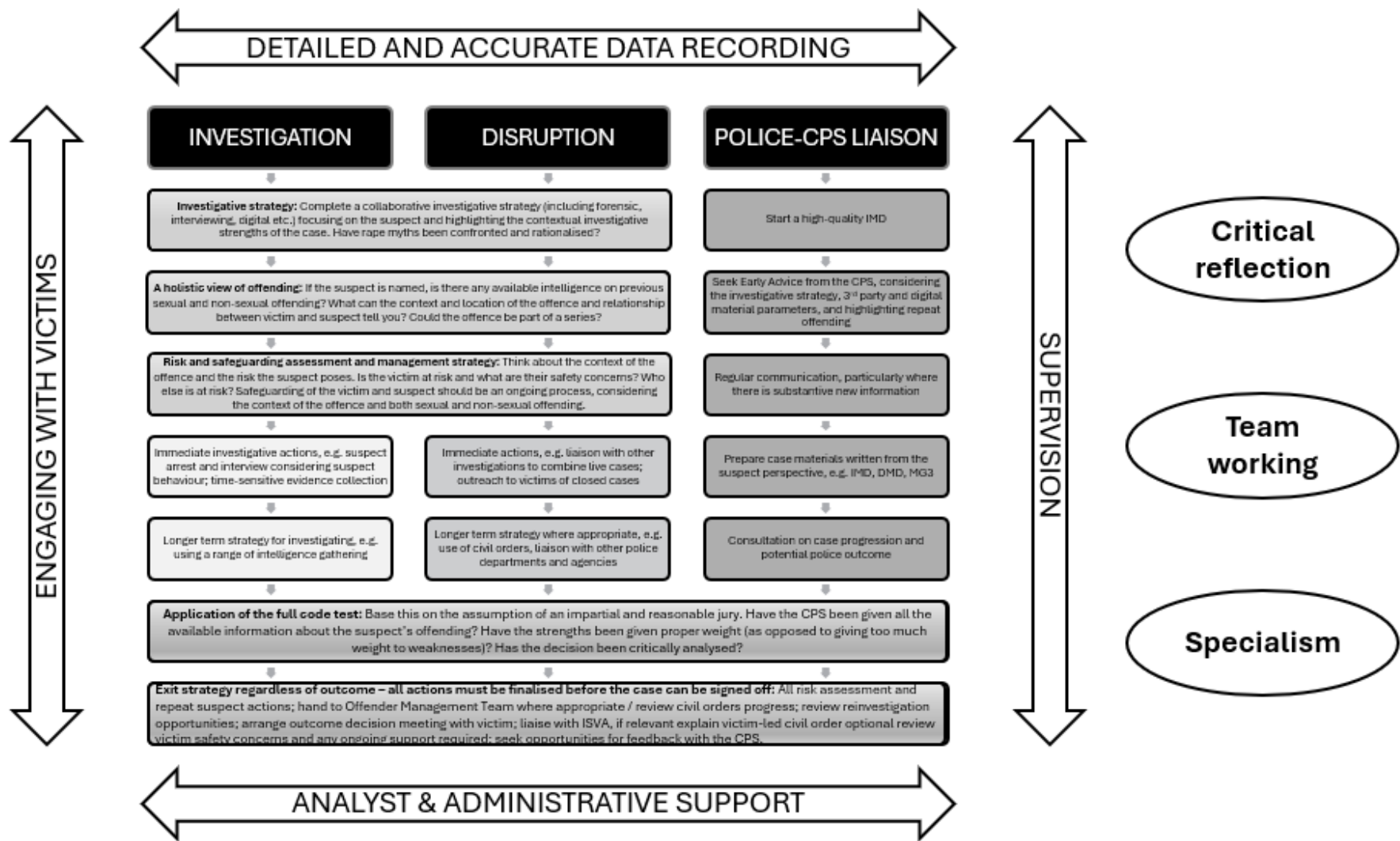


Figure 2. A visualisation of Pillar 1 and 2 investigative best practice in RASSO investigations. Source: Authors own work

Investigation

During our work on OSB we found that, often, investigations were conducted without an effective investigative strategy, or where there was one, it was of poor quality and often reduced to a list of actions. This resulted in missed investigative opportunities because of a deficiency in strategic direction and a lack of critical reflection and diligent action. In addition, even where there were investigative strategies in place, officers' decision making was often based on a flawed set of parameters tied to the reliance on assumptions and misconceptions about RASSO and an over-scrutiny of victims, meaning most investigations placed disproportionate emphasis on victim credibility issues (see Gekoski et al., 2023; HMICFRS, 2021a). In 82% of the cases we reviewed in the first year of OSB, across five police forces, there were missed opportunities to progress the investigation. It was also striking across the forces that officers had often not officially documented their investigative strategy or decision making, but officers conducting case reviews often still assumed that one must have been done. Without accurate records, however, colleagues accessing the case files may erroneously assume that, for example, relevant evidence has been gathered, and background checks completed and highlights the importance of transparency within investigations both for policing and with regards to multiagency cooperation.

An understanding of suspect behaviour was also clearly lacking in the RASSO investigations we reviewed and in our interviews with officers (across ranks and levels of experience), which also hampered officers' ability to form effective investigative strategies. This is a core issue as suspect behaviour is central to the more appropriate generation of an investigative strategy. To be able to produce a suspect focused investigative strategy officers need to understand that people make decisions to commit a sex offence. The suspect's behaviour towards the victim, the choices they make, and the way they account for these choices, should be central to the investigation. This premise is supported in much of the existing guidance for officers, including the Authorised Professional Practice Guidance on Investigations (College of Policing, 2013) which states that 'investigators should conduct a suspect-focused investigation taking previous offending history and behaviours into account'.

Formulating an appropriate investigative strategy can help facilitate stronger case building, assist officers with making better decisions as to the direction and outcome of the case, and provide better support for and service to the victim. To conduct an effective and timely RASSO investigation, officers need to understand how to produce a suspect-focused investigative

strategy which demonstrates that they are considering and collecting evidence for all elements that might be relevant to the case (e.g. the collection of forensic or digital material, conducting suspect and victim interviews) and that they are avoiding relying on myths and misconceptions about the victim, the suspect, and the offence. In addition, the contextual investigative merits of the case need to be given due consideration and foregrounded in the investigative strategy. Officers need to ensure a suspect-focused investigative strategy is clearly articulated from the start and throughout investigations, with regular review and updating of the strategy as the investigation progresses. Where we saw evidence of this working well, officers were able to articulate an investigative strategy which primarily focused on the suspect, ensuring that the strategy was balanced, evidence-based, and context-led. Many officers were resistant to the concept of a suspect-focused investigation fearing that we were suggesting a biased investigation. Instead, we are seeking to restore fair and impartial investigations that are not focused on victim credibility which is supported by the guidance from the Joint National Action Plan (JNAP) which includes a more suspect-focused investigation model (CPS & National Police Chiefs' Council, 2021) and whose work is being continued by the Joint Rape Improvement Group, which has oversight of the Police and CPS NOMs (CPS & National Police Chiefs' Council, 2024).

The article by Iliuta et al. (2025) of this collection focuses on one element of RASSO investigations, the initial investigative actions, including on five key actions: 1. the collection of DNA material; 2. the collection of digital material; 3. conducting background checks; 4. conducting suspect interviews and obtaining victim and witness accounts; and 5. conducting risk and safeguarding assessments. They explore how forces are (or are not) conducting these types of actions, when necessary, in RASSO investigations, providing a commentary on the efficacy of Soteria forces' investigative strategies during Year 2 of the project.

Disruption

During the project, it became clear that RASSO investigations were very siloed, with little consideration for a suspect's wider offending patterns, criminal history, or the ability for an officer or force to consider wider tactics to disrupt repeat offending. This ranged from fundamental investigative oversights, such as a failure to appropriately conduct comprehensive repeat suspects checks in all cases, to a lack of setup or structure which provided officers or police staff the time, space, and expertise to consider policing tactics that move beyond the immediate investigation. This resulted in a lack of understanding of what constituted repeat offending and limitations in the tools officers had at their disposal to tackle repeating offending.

We observed that where disruption expertise was available or seen in forces, such as in Offender Management Units or MOSOVO (management of sexual or violent offenders) teams, there was often very little collaboration between officers investigating RASSO and these other disruption-focused roles.

The importance of considering repeat offending was highlighted during Year 1, where initial findings highlighted that, for every named sex offence suspect within a four-year period, there was approximately a 25% chance they would have been named as a suspect (within their force alone) for a previous sex offence. While the findings must obviously be tempered with the fact that these were a sample of suspects, not convicted offenders, it demonstrates the number of instances where officers have the potential to consider whether repeat offending intelligence is relevant to the case at hand. Moreover, when considering all offending history, the likelihood of a named suspect having been named for a previous offence rose to around 60%. This demonstrates the importance of officers thinking holistically about a suspect's offending, asking them to think beyond RASSO offending to consider how wider offending, such as non-contact sex offences (e.g. exposure) or other offences (e.g., violent, burglary, domestic abuse, or stalking offences) may be relevant to a suspect's overall course of conduct.

Our suggested approach highlights the importance of disruption alongside investigation. Thinking about repeat offending is important for the formulation of an effective investigative strategy – for instance, learning that a suspect has a history of repeatedly breaching bail conditions and / or restraining orders is likely to affect the safeguarding measures officer may take to protect a victim. Disruption is also important in terms of understanding how repeat offending could be targeted beyond an immediate investigation, such as the referral of suspects to MATAC (multiagency tasking and coordination) panels or MOSOVO (management of sexual or violent offenders teams), the use of civil orders, and other policing tools designed to tackle offending on a more long-term basis.

Like Iliuta et al. (2025), the article by Allen et al. (2024) in this collection relates to forces' ability to identify and complete disruption options, where required, during Year 2 of OSB. The paper pays particular attention to the exit strategy officers provided during each investigation, to gain a greater understanding of their wider strategy regarding offending disruption.

Police-CPS liaison

Some of our least surprising findings related to the poor relationship between the police and the CPS and the impacts this has on RASSO investigations, as this has been well documented elsewhere (e.g Burton, 2011; George & Ferguson, 2021a; 2021b; Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate, 2019; Information Commissioner, 2022; King et al., 2023). More recently, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services inspections (HMICFRS, 2021b; 2022) describe the relationship between investigators and prosecutors as needing 'fundamental improvement'. The JNAP between the police and the CPS was introduced in January 2021 (CPS & NPCC, 2021), and unsurprisingly, our data highlighted similar issues the JNAP sought to address. Key issues were the problems that arose from relying on faceless electronic systems for communication between the two organisations rather than being able to speak directly to a named individual. The lack of human contact meant that often things were 'lost in translation' leading to misunderstandings and frustrations. Across all forces there were strong positive memories of and desire for single points of contact in the CPS who engaged with officers face-to-face, sometimes through co-location. Additionally, a lack of timeliness in communication between officers and prosecutors was perceived to be the result of problems on both sides with early advice rarely being sought. More detailed information about our findings on police perspectives on joint working with the CPS can be found in Gekoski et al. (2023).

Effective liaison and co-working between the police and the CPS are vital for improving appropriate case outcomes. If the police seek early advice there is the opportunity for them to collaboratively develop the investigative strategy with prosecutors which should lead to strong cases being built. It is noteworthy that whilst we have focused on the relationship between the police and the CPS here, wider considerations around multiagency working and the relationships between the police and other organisations are equally applicable here, particularly within the context of wider disruption and the multiagency approach to policing.

Gekoski (2024) and Ferreira et al. (2025) describe the necessary liaison required between the police and the CPS for an effective investigation to take place. Gekoski (2024) explores the use of the Investigation Management Document (IMD) in RASSO investigations. IMDs must be started by police at the beginning of an investigation and should contain all crucial information about the case, and shared with the CPS at the point a charging decision is sought. Ferreira et al.'s (2025) focus on the point of the charging decision, exploring officers' understanding of the application

of the Full Code Test (which is applied by Crown Prosecutors and police decision-makers when deciding whether a suspect is to be charged with an offence) in Year 2 of OSB.

We now describe the three additional elements which are represented to the right of the columns in Figure 2.

Critical reflection

A lack of critical analysis and reflection was often evident in how officers approached and prioritised actions in ongoing investigations. This meant there could be issues around understanding the urgency and/or necessity of building a comprehensive case to document the RASSO. Our findings across the five forces suggest that poor and inconsistent supervision in relation to case progress, officer wellbeing and caseload management was the norm. This was a consequence of inadequate resources and deskilling meaning that even knowledgeable and experienced officers found it difficult to give sufficient mentoring and supervision, which can provide and encourage necessary critical reflection throughout the investigation.

Critical reflection is 'the ability to reflect on one's actions so as to take a critical stance or attitude towards one's own practice and that of one's peers, engaging in a process of continuous adaptation and learning' (Schön, 1983, p.102-104). As argued in Norman et al., (2022, p.277) 'critical reflection provides opportunities for professionals to consciously learn from experience' which, given the decades of flawed RASSO investigations (George & Ferguson, 2021a), is vital if we are to see transformative change. Critical reflection and analysis in RASSO investigations will enable more effective team working (see below) where colleagues feel empowered to constructively challenge each other's assumptions and decisions which should enhance decision making and the quality of their work (Christopher, 2015; Norman & Williams, 2017; Whelan & Gent, 2013). Other benefits of critical reflection include the identification of training and welfare needs. As noted above, more formal working and case sharing between colleagues may facilitate peer critical reflection, and more robust and engaged supervision should also encourage this process. See Norman et al. (2022) for further details relating to the importance of this and how this could be achieved within RASSO investigations.

Team approach

Officers working on RASSO were expected to conduct a multitude of different tasks (e.g. collect evidence, risk assessment and safeguarding, suspect checks) often with very little capacity to do

so. Officers were often seen to be juggling high caseloads, with RASSO investigations often competing with other, non-RASSO tasks that often had to take precedence. Capacity was shown to effect both the efficacy of RASSO investigations and officers' own wellbeing (Sondhi et al., 2023).

Given the issues seen with capacity investigation in RASSO, we posited that a team approach to conducting RASSO investigations is the most viable way forward of ensuring more complete investigations are undertaken. A team approach to investigating RASSO is again not a new concept. Indeed, in some forces RASSO investigations have for at least the last twenty years routinely been assigned both an investigating officer and a victim focused officer (Horvath & Yexley, 2011). Equally, team investigations are more routinely conducted in other crime types, such as murder or terrorism (Major Crime Investigation Manual, 2021). There are also many logistical factors to consider; the way some forces can implement teams of people to work on one investigation may differ depending on their location, demand, and set up.

Walley et al. (2025) in this collection provide a more detailed insight into the capacity issues seen across Pillars 1, 2, 3, and 4 in OSB, using data from Year 1 collected across these pillars. This paper also provides a commentary on the potential for using a team approach as a solution to some of these capacity issues, considering the benefits and challenges of such an approach, and explores the way in which a team approach to investigating RASSO may augment officer efficacy.

Specialism

A significant finding for Pillars 1 and 2 was the importance of recognising the specialist knowledge and skills required to investigate RASSO if positive change is to occur. This also requires recognition of both the niche specialisms required within these investigations, e.g. knowledge of RASSO assumptions and misconceptions, investigative interviewing, and where specialist knowledge may overlap with the investigation of other offences, e.g. the trauma-informed approach required to deal with victims of several different interpersonal offences, such as child exploitation and domestic abuse. Our findings showed a clear lack of institutional prioritisation for specialist training, roles, and units within RASSO that has hindered the development of evidence-based practice in RASSO policing.

We advocate for the development of a specialist sex offences investigator role, with specialist knowledge, skills, and capability to handle all functions within an investigation and not become assigned to certain aspects, such as victim care. Officers working in RASSO should have a keen understanding of *all* the different types of specialist knowledge required to be an effective RASSO investigator. This recommendation is in line with developments in the MOSOVO officer role (Mydlowski, Turner-Moore & Kewley, 2024) and the direction of travel proposed by Creedon (2023) in relation to police-led management of registered sex offenders in the community.

Using data collected by pillars 1 and 2 across Years 1 and 2, the article by Barbin et al. (2024) in this collection relates to officers' perceptions of specialism in RASSO, exploring in detail the issues and challenges related to implementing specialism and officers' views on the importance of specialism within RASSO, concluding that most officers view specialism as a tool to improve how police forces prevent and tackle RASSO. It also considers the structural changes that may be required, and from a functional equivalence perspective how this is actioned may look different in different forces, e.g. the use of specialist RASSO units in some forces, compared to the use of broader, 'interpersonal offences' units in others.

Conclusion and looking forward

This introduction has provided a general summary, including a visual representation, of the elements that Pillars 1 and 2 identified as being critical to RASSO investigations, alongside some central tenets that bolster officers' ability to investigate this crime type. There are three core strands which include the investigative requirements that need to be considered simultaneously alongside the other factors (covered by other Pillars elsewhere) for RASSO investigations to be meaningfully improved.

During the course of OSB we were able to see some changes in the forces: in how officers thought about offending; how by focusing on the suspect new avenues for investigation were identified; how thinking holistically and strategically about offending provided opportunities to disrupt prolific suspects; and how more effective liaison and communication with the CPS yielded more effective and streamlined investigations with input from other law enforcement experts. The changes we saw were not always consistent, and where structural and logistical barriers presented themselves – such as issues relating to the retention of training and motivated, or the lack of access to PND data because of licencing limitations – forces often struggled to overcome these. Further emerging evidence of the effects of OSB on the policing of RASSO were captured

in the HMICFRS (2024) report on an inspection of progress to introduce the NOM in nine early adopter forces. The HMICFRS (2024) makes it clear that there are mechanisms that could be implemented at a national level that would assist forces with the problems they are facing implementing the changes recommended by OSB factors that were beyond the scope of Pillars 1 and 2 to put in place. As noted above, while the academics were on hand in Year 2 of OSB to monitor and evaluate the implementation of measures and change within the forces, the decisions around how to operationalise the findings from OSB were the purview of the forces and policymakers. The HMICFRS report does, therefore, speak to the importance of forces understanding the practical implications of the findings, and working towards creating a comprehensive implementation plan to maximise the chances of positive and lasting change occurring.

We acknowledge and stress here that while the testing we conducted between September 2022 to September 2023 provides a good first step in understanding the efficacy of the OSB recommendations, and the subsequent implementation of change in forces, the research presented is not an independent evaluation and it follows that such an evaluation is needed. What is also clear from the emerging evidence is that change seems to be variable, with some recommendations seemingly finding less traction within policing. The HMICFRS (2024), for instance, reports increased focus on victim care, however, it is clear there are still inherent issues with understanding and policing repeat offending. It is important to understand, not just whether change has happened, but how it has happened. More detailed and independent evaluation of the component parts of OSB, as well as its effect overall, will allow us to understand the key mechanisms behind any change, and the barriers which may speak to longstanding issues with the investigation of RASSO that have seen previous sets of recommendations prove ineffective.

We also acknowledge that true transformational change takes time. Often, for instance, many of the changes we saw during Year 2 were implemented towards the end of the project, simply because of the scope and nature of the changes that were required. To make significant change, time and appropriate resourcing is required, and any evaluation into such change must take this into account.

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