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Policing Rape and Serious Sexual Offences: Officers' Insights on Police Specialism

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Abstract

Purpose. Several studies have been conducted to understand why the conviction rate for rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) remains so low. Increasing pressure and criticism have led to questioning why improvements in RASSO investigations are proving ineffective. Previous findings have hypothesised that police specialism could help police officers better tackle RASSO, but more research is needed. **Methodology.** Eighty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted. Data collection spanned across two years, from October 2021 until May 2023, and included police officers from four police forces in England and Wales. Template Analysis was used to identify recurrent patterns around police specialism for RASSO. **Findings.** Most officers viewed specialism as a tool to improve how police forces prevent and tackle RASSO. Despite this, the lack of prioritisation of specialist training, roles, and units specifically for this crime type has hindered the development of evidence-based practice in policing. The impact on well-being, resources, organisational support and role identity has been explored. **Originality.** This is the first qualitative study to look at officers' insights on police specialism for RASSO in England and Wales. Officers discussed day-to-day challenges associated with conducting RASSO investigations while reflecting on potential advantages related to dedicated specialist units and/or specialist roles.

Keywords: policing, police specialism, specialism, specialist units, police interviews, RASSO, RASSO investigators, sex offences, police officers.

Introduction

Recent years have seen reports for rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) continue to increase, with 1.1 million adults estimated to have become victims of sex offences in England and Wales, at the end of March 2022 (Davies *et al.*, 2022; ONS, 2023). Despite this, the charge rate for sex offenders was as low as 472, in the December of the same year (HM Government, 2024). The substantial gap between reported incidents versus prosecution and conviction rates, as well as research conducted on police officers' beliefs around rape victims, have led to increased scrutiny of how the police are handling RASSO investigations (Oppenheim, 2019). Even more so as most victims of rape reported having had negative interactions with officers described as "judgmental, disbelieving and lacking empathy", subsequently putting off victims from pursuing the allegations (HMICFRS, 2021, p.2). Supporting this, most of the cases of victim attrition occur right at the reporting stage, right after coming in contact with police personnel (Brown *et al.*, 2007; Murphy *et al.*, 2021). In this regard, evidence has shown that police officers adhering to rape myths were concerningly more likely to believe victims made false rape allegations (Gekoski *et al.*, 2023). Officers were also prone to prioritise cases that they believed were more likely to reach a conviction in court (Sinclair, 2022). As a result of poor victim experience following police encounters and the discouragingly small numbers of rape cases progressing to court amongst other factors, not only the police but the entire criminal justice system has been heavily criticised and labelled as institutionally unequipped to adequately deal with RASSO (CJJI, 2022).

Following several tailored campaigns, interventions, and projects to understand why the conviction rate for RASSO remains low despite the overall increase in reports (Home Office, 2021), researchers from Operation Soteria Bluestone (OSB) were tasked with understanding why improvements in RASSO investigations are struggling to meet the required standard (Stanko, 2022). After the publication of preliminary OSB findings, it became clear that challenges associated with RASSO, paired with resistance to change how RASSO is investigated in the first place, have hindered public trust in the police and highlighted some of the systemic, legal, and socio-cultural failures of contemporary policing (Angiolini, 2024).

Rumney *et al.* (2019) suggested that equipping police forces with specialist-trained officers and specialist units could positively impact prosecution rates, lower victim attrition for rape cases, and

improve, as a result, public support. In line with this, Williams *et al.* (2022) have stressed the need to enhance learning material around rape investigations and postulated that a lack of access to adequate RASSO training can hinder officers' workplace well-being and satisfaction. The need for specialist training to improve victim support and engagement in rape investigations has also been raised as part of a joint government inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) response to RASSO (NPCC, 2021). Despite these recommendations, there is a consistent lack of understanding of how the impact of specialism in policing can unequivocally be measured and maximised (Baroness Casey, 2023; Dalton *et al.*, 2022; Westmarland *et al.*, 2015). For instance, Sondhi *et al.* (2023) reported that police personnel who investigate RASSO experience higher levels of burnout compared with their non-RASSO colleagues, suggesting a potentially negative impact of specialism. Similarly, Norman *et al.* (2022) note that overlooked psychological stressors associated with RASSO cases can hinder officers' capacity on the job, with subsequent negative effects on the entire investigation.

As a result, although police specialism¹ has been speculated to be both a facilitator and an obstacle to enhanced police performance and case handling (Dalton *et al.*, 2022; Westmarland *et al.*, 2015), evidence-based measurements of police specialism effects on rape investigations, case workloads and victim engagement for RASSO are scarce (Author *et al.*, 2024). At present, only a minority of specialist officers and units are currently dealing with RASSO-only incidents in England and Wales², and there are no nationally established criteria on how RASSO units should operate (George & Ferguson, 2021; Siddique, 2021). Parallel to this, the influence of broader societal factors in limiting access to specialist resources for victim support and the pervasive and systematic consequences of delaying RASSO trials have also been pinpointed (Spence *et al.*, 2022).

¹ Although an official definition is not available, police specialism can be broadly defined as any practice, training, or unit that uses skills and technologies related to specific areas of policing and criminal behaviour (Ministry of Defence, 2021). More specifically, it revolves around tailored demands, needs, and challenges associated with criminal investigations, victims, and perpetrators.

² There are 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales (39 and 4, respectively). In addition to this, three government-managed special forces supervise the entire nation: the British Transport Police, the Civil Nuclear Constabulary and the Ministry of Defence Police.

While looking at public dissatisfaction with rape investigations and pressure from the government and independent reviews to increase conviction rates and improve investigation processes (HM Government, 2021), the perspective of police officers frequently gets overlooked (Kassem & Erken, 2024). Neyroud *et al.* (2016) pinpointed that silencing police officers' requests and concerns can equally lead to higher job dissatisfaction and impaired investigative performance. As a result, putting officers' needs at the centre, allows researchers and policy-makers to understand what should be prioritised to tailor future recommendations aimed at improving specialist and non-specialist approaches to RASSO investigations.

In light of the current approaches to sexual violence, repeat suspects, and the lack of established officers and force-specific specialisms (Davies *et al.*, 2021) the authors believe that recommendations on RASSO specialism should be informed by a systemic, evidence-based approach to change that starts from the perspective of police officers actively investigating these crimes.

The current study

There is a gap in research around the effectiveness of police specialism in England and Wales (van Standen & Lawrence, 2010), with most studies being limited to government surveys on victim experience and satisfaction with police work (Merenda *et al.*, 2020; Sani *et al.*, 2022). This study is based on the first-hand experiences of police officers investigating RASSO and therefore gives unique insights into the challenges associated with RASSO investigations, as well as the perceived benefits and issues attributed to specialism.

Method

Design

The study made use of interview transcripts collected during the first two years of project OSB, between October 2021 to May 2023. The project has a 'pillar' organisation and looked simultaneously at qualitative, quantitative and case study data. The secondary data analysis proposed in this study was designed to maximise the material that held the most in-depth knowledge on police specialism, and interviews allow for the gathering of rich, detailed, nuanced data on a subject. As highlighted by Jamshed (2014), semi-structured interviews are most appropriate when investigating under-researched

topics for which the most common issues have not been outlined yet. Survey and case-study data available through OBS were therefore ruled out.

Template Analysis was used to analyse data. Although “Template Analysis is not inextricably bound to any one epistemology [...] and can be used in qualitative psychology research from a range of epistemological positions” (Brooks *et al.*, 2015, p.205), a critical realist approach (Taylor, 2018) has been taken. In this sense, the study aimed to look at how police officers’ first-hand experiences of RASSO shaped their perspective of RASSO specialism, as well as possible associated benefits and challenges for its future development.

Sample

A total of 82 interviews with police officers from four different police forces in England and Wales³. Interviewed participants’ ranks included Police Constable (PC), Detective Constable (DC), Detective Sergeant (DS), Detective Inspector (DI), Detective Superintendent (Det Supt), and other senior ranks, as highlighted in Gekoski *et al.* (2023, p.6). Some officers were working for specialist units at the time of data collection, although this information was not collected in detail during the interviews. Participants were an opportunity sample with their participation based on their availability, as well as proximity with the officers involved in OSB. None of the participants withdrew their participation during or after the interviews.

Procedure

This research was approved by the University of Suffolk (ref: RETH21/006), Bournemouth University (ref: 39633) and Middlesex University (ref: 16178) internal ethics committees. All interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams, or conducted over the telephone, in line with force-specific anonymity requirements. Participants were either recruited via email through OSB⁴ police leads who acted as gatekeepers, or contacted directly by the researchers. Where gatekeepers were used, police leads sent emails to possible candidates, who were then asked to get in touch with the researchers directly if interested in participating. Gatekeepers were not subsequently informed who had and had not

³ Some of the officers were interviewed twice across the two years of OSB data collection.

⁴ This research was conducted as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone, funded by the UK Home Office. Designed by Katrin Hohl and Betsy Stanko, work package (pillar) leads were Kari Davies, Miranda Horvath, Kelly Johnson, Jo Lovett, Tiggey May, Olivia Smith, and Emma Williams.

responded. Where participants expressed an interest in participating, the information sheet and consent form were distributed, and the consent form was required to be signed and returned before each interview.

Across the two years of data collection, different types of interviews were conducted, with an average time for participation was 60 minutes. Year 1 interview questions were mainly exploratory and targeted the officers' understanding of the challenges associated with investigating RASSO, as well as their roles and responsibilities within the police force. Year 2 interviews were largely concerned with officers' perceptions of the changes happening in each force following OSB's recommendations. Participants were fully aware of the purpose of the interviews and the topics being investigated, which were explained in the information sheets. For each interview, two researchers were present: one leading the interview, and a second taking notes. Audio and video files were then uploaded on Trint, a software that generates time-stamped transcripts. Researchers independently cross-checked the accuracy of the transcriptions before analysis. Identifying information was removed or redacted in line with privacy and anonymity policies. Each officer was randomly assigned an ID, along with their force identifier (A-D), which was used when reporting interview extracts. Further details about the interviews in general can be found in Stanko (2022) Appendix 7. For the purposes of this study, the interview transcripts were reanalysed specifically to understand officers' views on specialism, which was one of the aspects asked about in the interviews.

Analysis

Template Analysis, a type of thematic analysis widely used in occupational and medical research and more recently applied to qualitative psychological research, was chosen as the most appropriate for this study (Brooks *et al.*, 2015). Template analysis is a good fit for secondary qualitative data analysis of transcripts taken from large-scale projects, like OSB in this case, and allows for a more flexible approach to theme coding (King & Brooks, 2017). As a result, the creation of the themes was informed by relevant findings from prior published research and adjusted as new knowledge from the transcripts was acquired, alongside the creation of entirely new themes (Miller & Crabtree, 1999). Accordingly, quotes from officers that related exclusively to the research purposes were selected and used to draw a unique analysis of specialism's characteristics and insights within policing. Each of the

researchers assessed the themes independently to ensure that objectivity, quality and accuracy were preserved. A summary of the Template Analysis flow chart is shown in **Figure 1**.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Results

From the 82 interviews, three key themes and six sub-themes were identified. A summary of these and their description are shown in **Table I**.

INSERT TABLE I HERE

1. Potential Impact of Specialism in Policing

1.1. Better caseload, recruitment and investigation management

Although it is difficult to measure the direct impact of specialism, some officers outlined areas of their practice where improvements around specialism could be beneficial. Participant C5 discussed how specialist officers could benefit, by virtue of their specialist skills, from a capped caseload. Adding this could incentivise specialist officers to focus on RASSO cases only, and improve, as a result, work manageability:

“The very early suggestions are that it is working, and it is things around specialist officers with capped caseloads that if you have, you know, five rapes, you can investigate them better than if you have 80 rapes.”

Officer C6, reported how early improvements in their specialist RASSO teams effectively led to a more manageable distribution of workload. This preliminary finding is important, as concerns around officers’ capacity were also highlighted in Baroness Casey (2023)’s review, which reported how current RASSO caseloads are exponentially higher than the 13 cases per officer standard in force when the Metropolitan Police Sapphire Unit⁵ was instituted.

Two officers from different forces added that instituting a specialist RASSO unit could not only ease investigation management and efficiency but also attract more proactive and motivated officers:

⁵ Sapphire Units were instituted in the early 2000s in London to solely focus on rape, engage with victims and take a specialist approach to the rape investigations. They were subsequently reorganised into smaller units and teams, effectively disbanding the original central units (Women Against Rape, 2019).

“Obviously the force is probably moving in the right direction in terms of having a specialist team now with officers that actually want to deal with those offences [...]with the creation of the rape teams being set up and all the people have volunteered to come to this team because they were interested in line of work [...] I don't think there's certainly many police officers that might match up with the number of years I've been doing that come to work [that do not] want to do a better job [with RASSO]” (D6).

“It needs [...] a specialised unit. There needs to be that want to be there, the desire to be there [...] it needs to have that resilience of the team to investigate rapes properly” (A9).

Amidst the challenges of funding RASSO specialism in the current policing climate, police personnel across forces believe that doing so is likely to improve the organisational and managerial structure of RASSO investigations, officers focus and timeliness:

“A rape investigation will sit within a team of detectives who are also dealing with assaults, who are also dealing with probably another two or three rapes at the same time [...] it needs like a specialist unit to focus. And give them the attention that they need, they are long, protracted enquiries, because of all the third-party material and everything else [...] And in a CID office, there's always something new coming in. They take longer than perhaps what they should to investigate because of the commitments of everyday policing.” (Participant B3)

Participant C6 did, however, speak of working very hard to “keep a lid on it”, and ensure that other team members were not overwhelmed, as for some forces more than others, investments in specialist development are reportedly not where they could be. This suggests that even though specialism is generally perceived positively, more improvements to its practical implementation are still needed, particularly around officers’ well-being and organisational support (Williams et al., 2022). Agreeing, Turgoose *et al.* (2017) highlighted that specialist RASSO officers are more likely to develop PTSD, burnout, and compassion fatigue, when compared with officers dealing with non-RASSO crimes, demonstrating the importance of mitigating potential challenges if implementing specialism. These elements should be considered when looking at specialist officers’ development, in an environment that allows skills maximisation and support for RASSO investigations.

1.2. Perceived improvements in crime response and victim support

Some participants reported that the introduction of RASSO specialism in policing could significantly improve policing response to crime and help specialist officers better recognise RASSO offending dynamics. For instance, one officer mentioned how the introduction of specialism in their force has made officers more aware and attentive:

“Over the years, we've got much better, certainly are... where most forces have specialist investigators. I think when the cases get to those teams, I think they are much better at recognising patterns of offending behaviour and ensuring there's an appropriate response” (A4).

Brown and Ballucci (2024) found that specialist policing analysts in Canada have been effective at identifying emerging criminal behaviours as well as predicting future patterns of criminality, leading to an overall better-targeted crime response. Similarly, RASSO specialists seem better equipped to deal with victims compared with non-specialists, which is driven, according to one officer, by the type of training received. For instance, “[Sex offence specialists] are police constables who had had specialist interviewing [...] and victim engagement training” (A9). In agreement, officers from two different forces believed that exclusive RASSO-focus, in a specialist format, can improve the quality of service for victims:

“It was better when we had that very narrow remit around RASSO. We had specialist experienced officers then, and I think we delivered a better service to victims because that was the only thing that we dealt with” (C3).

“The uniform officers who are first on the scene, they don't receive any specialised training. Which obviously creates its own challenges in terms of the necessary support that the victims will receive upon arrival or even obtaining incorrect evidence [...] Recently, a uniform officer has turned up at a call and has provided the victim of a swab to swab herself vaginally” (A5).

These officers' perceptions suggest that specialist-trained RASSO officers displayed higher standards of post-report victim care, had greater interview communication skills, and seemed more aware of the underpinning mechanisms of victim trauma and RASSO patterns of perpetration (Rumney *et al.*, 2019; van Staden & Lawrence, 2010).

2. Police Specialism in Practice

Some participants spoke of how specialism manifests in practice when dealing with RASSO investigations, and the operational changes that had occurred since the establishment of RASSO units and/or specialist roles. Two subthemes emerged consistently across the interviews: force diversity and lack of specialism leading to delays.

2.1. Focus on RASSO-only investigations varies by police force

Officers elaborated on the changes that specialism has brought into the force and, consequently, on their roles. Positively, several participants from one force highlighted that specialism protected them against being routinely sent to attend non-specialist or non-RASSO incidents. According to Participant A20:

“Although [specialist and non-specialist teams] are still aligned with their shift pattern and have briefings together [...] [specialists] don't get sucked into that other work as much. Sometimes it's really, really busy and we do help out. But it's less of routine, I'd say.”

Officer C1 also reported feeling relieved that the structure of their specialist team allows them to work on RASSO cases almost exclusively, as specialist and non-specialist teams are “kept separate as much as possible [...] So it's quite rare that we get pulled in because obviously they know that we're here to deal with rape. But we do still have that kind of slight issue where we can be pulled off for other stuff sometimes.” Agreeing, Participant A4 stated that since the dismantling of their RASSO specialist unit/team, officers with a RASSO background are more likely to be pulled out of their normal duty, adding:

“I think [RASSO team name] should [be] a specialist unit. I know that's not the recommendation, but [...] I think it would be much better. You know, we get pulled out [...] we cover nights together with other Safeguarding units, so like domestic violence, to deal with a prisoner [...] if there's a lot, sometimes, you know on our normal shifts, we will have to then go out and deal with some DV stuff because just the volume there is so much that [it] takes us away from the job as well”.

Officer A3 reiterated similar concerns, elaborating that not being able to focus on RASSO investigations to attend to other crimes has negatively affected both their well-being and capacity on the job:

“If I can never get any [RASSO team name] work done for a week, at nights I put my all into [RASSO team name] jobs that come in [...] that affects the quality [of the work] from moment that job comes in. It doesn't work. It doesn't work properly. People are just worn down from it, really.”

The overall picture suggests that a positive practical differentiation between RASSO specialists and non-specialist duties – in terms of specialists not having their attention disrupted – has been perceived not only by officers but also by their colleagues and organisations. The findings indicate how well-designed investments in police specialism could act as protective mechanisms for officers' capacity. In contrast, negative effects associated with forced specialisation have been outlined, stressing the importance of adequately measuring specialism and finding the right balance for its maximisation.

However, participants from other forces depict a different scenario, which suggests that the way specialism is instituted, contextualised, and implemented as part of officers' roles varies across forces and that how specialist units are delineated influences their day-to-day practice. With the implementation of specialist units where an offender may have committed multiple types of offences, there are potential conflicts around where those investigations sit and whether they are investigated by one officer, even if some of those offences do not sit within that officer's specialist purview:

“If someone reports an ABH, and in doing that, they then identify a whole series of historic sexual offences. It's probably more likely to stay with the domestic abuse investigator, but they might then seek support from specialist sexual assault investigators to say look, I've got this [...] You know, can I have some support from a sexual offences expert as I progress the domestic abuse investigation and then probably another conversation prosecutor to say [...] How do we best manage the risk this perpetrator poses? How do we get the best justice outcome? Is it, we focus on coercive, controlling behaviour and the series of sexual offences provide evidence of that?” (A13).

For this, the operationalisation of specialist units, including what offence types may ‘sit’ well together to draw on similar expertise, and how repeat and varied offending is handled, has subsequent effects on role clarity, timeline, and multiagency (and multi-speciality) criminal investigations.

2.2. Lack of specialist personnel leads to delays in RASSO-specific responses to crime

Numerous officers commented on the connection between not having enough RASSO specialists and unnecessary delays in investigations, linked to having to wait at the scene for specialist RASSO personnel to arrive, which highlighted logistical and operational concerns:

“When you're on [force specific] unit, the mission creep of other areas of policing that suddenly create a high demand comes in. So, you might have to contribute to a high-risk [...] or you might have to contribute to some other incident that's happening ... and the reality is that officer's lost eight hours that they could have been working on their caseload” (Participant A10).

If officers’ work on their RASSO caseloads gets sidelined while they deal with other types of police work – such as investigating other crime types, dealing with prisoners, or policing demonstrations – then, as noted by this participant, their RASSO cases will invariably suffer. If investigations are not conducted promptly, this may lead - for example - to loss of evidence or witnesses, and delays in obtaining statements or forensics, which may lead to delays in the case and increased victim attrition.

Contrary to the previous subtheme which showed overlap across crimes, officers reported this finding is strictly connected with the increasing demand to attend reported RASSO crimes (HM Government, 2024), in the face of specialism understaffing (Stanko, 2022). While this suggests that the need for specialist skills is recognised by some of the forces, the delay in crime reporting is strictly dependent on specialist officers' availability:

“If a rape is reported ... somebody phones 999 and the offender is their partner. [The first responders] would [then] wait for the deployment of specialist officers to engage with the victim and talk about [going] to sexual assault referral centre services.” (Participant C2).

These concerns are also flagged by Officer A6, who described how time-consuming sending ad hoc RASSO specialists to attend incidents can be: “[...] ring someone else, wait around for two hours, get a [specialist officer] deployed”.

These findings are important as delays, both at the reporting and pre-trial stage, have been consistently found to significantly contribute to the inability of victims to get closure and are more likely to generate secondary victimisation (Bruman & Brooks-Hay, 2020), particularly if they already face discrimination, disabilities, or mental health concerns (Gillen, 2019).

In this regard, Participant A13 stressed that to address investigative delays and overlaps in RASSO offences, a re-modernisation and conceptualisation of the specialism model in policing is required:

“The longer-term plan for me is a complete redesign of the model [...] and I'm telling all the superintendents this is a real short-term fix just to get the cases over the line that are hanging there because otherwise we risk losing those with victim attrition as well because we're taking so long in our decision making.”

Thus, despite specialist skills being largely valued, the lack of a consistent body of trained specialist RASSO officers leads to delays in responding to reports and providing high-quality victim support. This is compounded when specialist officers must attend to other crime types, and has the potential to negatively affect crime outcomes and cause further delays before the case is even considered for a charge.

3. Organisational and training concerns

Officers across forces reported that specialism development has been hindered by poor organisational support and a lack of investment in adequate specialist training opportunities. The following section explores these two subthemes in detail.

3.1. High demand, scarce resources, and low priority

Officers from specialist RASSO units, or assigned to specialist RASSO roles, are reportedly struggling to provide adequate and consistent responses to crime due to increasing demand for specialist knowledge:

“Some of my teams, for example, [...] we have got a workforce design that's based on business process modelling and demand. So, now at the moment, we're challenged because 999 demand has gone up and kept going up for many years now” (A13).

“Your hands are tied in terms of that demand that comes in and you can't do the things you want to do” (D6).

These officers detailed what the demands of the job and lack of resources looked like in practice:

“I probably do 10 to 20 hours on top of my 40 hours a week to manage what's going on. And that's not unique to me; that's the same with my staff. Even with their additional hours, they put in a lot of hours in their own time. They take their laptops to work from home. They'll come in on their rest days” (C4).

“I checked the scores on the doors this morning, and I've got over 100 cases. It's ridiculous, to speak frankly. How am I expected to manage and supervise that amount? When it gets anywhere over 70, you're really struggling to keep up to date with what's what ... I feel like I'm getting lost in the volume ... We're having to pick and choose cases based on timelines, constraints with bail clocks, people in custody [...] There's a lot that has to wait” (D8).

While this is a concern shared across different crimes and departments in policing, participants suggest that the primary concerns associated with the successful implementation of specialism lie in the demand-resources-priority triad and their intrinsic connection. For instance, Officer C3 explained that due to the high demand and stress associated with working in a specialist unit, team members frequently “Had to take on cases where people had left, and you always get that because people are going to retire, or [...] leave. It's not like it was some kind of paradise or anything, but. Yeah, I think it's harder as it is now because we just have so many... less resources.”

Participant A3 added that the lack of financial investments in RASSO specialism “make it harder to recruit [specialist] people as consistently because of the fact it's not its own [specialist unit]. It just doesn't. And it should be.” Participant C11 highlighted a negative impact on specialist staff recruitment and retainment due to recent increased demand and the fact that RASSO specialism is not prioritised equally across forces:

“On one hand, it's difficult to get people in those [specialist] roles because it's viewed as a very tough job. And also, when you lose someone from that [specialist] unit, it's difficult to replace them. So, I think that's one of the barriers [...] the number of staff available.”

Officers also told how specialism prioritisation and resources have changed across the years, and are now both concerningly low:

“So, as you know [RASSO team name] should be specialist. And that's been pushed back. [...] I was on [RASSO team name] [...] years ago when it was specialist and there was a different mentality to how we worked back then to what we do now in terms of the levels of staffing and the expertise of the DCs and the officers coming in. There was [a] much higher standard back then, which we try and maintain on a [local] level. But it's impossible when you're just screaming out for officers, you'd almost accept anything, if I'm honest with you. Which is a poor indictment of where we were to where we are now” (A1).

This suggests that increased focus and prioritisation of specialist needs should assist officers to better tackle crime demand and cope with the expectations associated with specialists' omnicompetence (House of Commons, 2023). However, officers voice how resources, staffing, and demand related to RASSO do not receive the same level of funding and attention allocated to other crimes. Thus, the seriousness of RASSO is not commensurate with the resources allocated:

“There has to be more of an emphasis on investigating sexual offences without a doubt, resourcing wise ... regularly we're told by senior management or senior officers that it's a horrifying crime ... and it holds a serious sentence and that they're serious investigations. However, there is not the reflection of the words that they've said [...] in the response that they make on operational level to us by providing enough resources to do our job” (A5).

This is not only concerning but also contrasts with the recent recommendations drafted by Sir Mark Rowley, the Metropolitan Police commissioner, which note how future governments should prioritise funding for RASSO and violence against women and girls (VAWG) in the same way that is done for counter-terrorism (Martin, 2024):

“If we're saying violence is our top priority and within that, violence against women and girls is a really big priority. And it's put our money where our mouth is, and let's make sure that our vacancy factors in those specialist teams dealing with rape and sexual offences, domestic abuse, and all levels, every bit of that end-to-end process, are, you know, are where they should be.” (A13).

3.2. Different outlooks on the effectiveness of specialist training

One of the ways that officers can become specialists and increase their specialist knowledge is through training. The literature shows that not being equipped with specialist RASSO skills and lack of experience can significantly hinder the trust of victims, and “hamper the investigation” of RASSO and VAWG (House of Commons, 2023, p.32). Supporting this, participants across forces reiterated how: “I received no training when I joined, and I still haven’t received any training” (A5). This was perceived as problematic by participants, especially as the serious nature of rape offences, paired with scarce conviction rates, means that different processes and procedures are often employed:

“When you land as a detective sergeant in [force specific unit] ... I was very surprised that I wasn't going to get any training, because it is so different. And trying to adapt to that, I know for me and a lot of my colleagues ... was very challenging. So why the detectives don't get [training] is something of a mystery to me” (A9).

“Where's the training? Where's the investment in the future detectives? The quality is going down because the upskilling is not there” (C7).

For forces that provide some level of training, participants often seem dissatisfied with its quality. Participant A1 mentioned being underwhelmed with the specialist training course, which did not match their expectations and failed to assist team members with practical expertise for use during RASSO investigations:

“We have specialist training, where we learn to interview somebody in a more effective manner, basically [...] It didn't help me do my like, do my day-to-day job [...] the interview techniques, 100% because you need that. And then the fact you can't carry on unless you've been signed off to say that you've passed that. It helped me understand about safeguarding people [...] rape

myths is one of the topics it talks about, you know what people might say, you know, kind of like, Oh, she was drunk she deserved it, or that sort of rape myth, and break it down and talk about how, you know, that's not right and it's not true and it's... it helps you understand the psychology of how people might be feeling after they've been raped, the different traumas they might go through [...] but it didn't help me do my actual job.”

Similarly, Participant A13 said the current level of training was inadequate in facilitating specialist officers to conduct RASSO investigations to the best of their abilities and eliciting practical changes for RASSO victims and charge rates:

“I don't think we can teach culture in a week on a course, but we can highlight to people they need to think differently. And so, my request was they needed to focus on rape myths and stereotypes, impacts of trauma, and victim credibility [...] So, they were my minimum standards. You know, I'm not a trainer and I'm not a course writer, but that is what I wanted the course to achieve. And my understanding of specialism isn't that process-driven bit, it's about how you think and understand.”

Officers perceive a disconnect between the training received and the ability to implement these recommendations as part of their day-to-day activities, making it difficult to understand the purpose of the training.

Participant A1 reported that having received specialist training historically made their RASSO team look “like the pinnacle of detective work”, to the extent that “people didn't want to apply [...] until they felt as if they were experienced and quality DCs. They were ready to move on to the next level.” They simultaneously underlined, however, systematic concerns of how specialist training is delivered to entry-level officers who start their careers as ‘specialists’, suggesting overall discontent with how the current specialist training is evolving:

“In terms of length of service and experience, some of the officers are very, very young in service and haven't got a lot of experience. They are coming into these sorts of teams without [X] accreditation, without necessarily being [X] trained initially, and they're sort of catching

up with that quite quickly and getting thrown into the deep end really without an opportunity to get better, and have a proper mentor, and see things through a little bit” (D5).

Overall, it was found that officers across all forces – albeit to differing degrees – frequently had young, often inexperienced, workforces dealing with specialist crimes. It was reported that officers could be thrown into investigating RASSO – sometimes with no investigative background broadly, and/or no background in investigating RASSO specifically. For example, direct entry detectives, response officers, or officers straight from uniform were filling gaps on rape teams and “working from the manual”. This was felt, particularly by more senior detectives, to be inappropriate at best and dangerous at worst:

“I don't think the makeup of our teams is effective. As an organisation, we have lost an awful lot of experienced staff, and the force is made up of very young staff now. I don't think it is appropriate that we have staff put onto complex teams with very little experience of any other investigation type and then expect them to be able to deal effectively with rape and sexual offenses with minimal supervision” (C3).

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to capture police officers’ perspective of police specialism, as encountered and practised while investigating RASSO. Most officers saw specialisms as tools to improve how they see and conduct their work, both in general and specifically for RASSO, within their respective forces. The plurality ‘specialisms’ is intentionally used, as police officers actively reflected on the importance of not only instituting specialist RASSO units but on investing in specialist knowledge and allocating adequate training for both serving and new-coming police personnel. Participants thus acknowledge and value different forms of specialism, whether these are articulated in the form of specialist training, roles, or investigation units. In line with the literature, some participants reported how specialism could improve the quality of the interaction with RASSO victims and enhance officers’ communication and interviewing skills (Rumney *et al.*, 2019). More broadly, participants highlighted how specialism brought (or had the potential to bring) positive changes to caseload, investigation management, crime response and victims’ support (van Staden & Lawrence, 2010). This

is in line with findings from Dalton *et al.* (2022, p.5), which stressed that specialist-trained RASSO officers perform better than non-specialist police officers in several “investigative procedures and processes” related to victims and perpetrators of RASSO incidents.

No potential negative effects of specialism were highlighted by participants, although there were concerns raised on how specialism is operationalised within each police force – rather than whether it is helpful in principle. As a result, the decision to dismantle/reorganise specialist units and non-evidence-based arguments *against* specialism have been hindering the chance to equip officers with adequate resources to bridge the gap between RASSO reports and suspect convictions, despite the officers perceiving specialism itself as effective (Martin, 2024). This is crucial, as when the Sapphire Unit was operating, almost 90% of RASSO victims reported being satisfied with the specialist support provided by specialist officers – making its dismantling even less understandable (MPA, 2010). Along these lines, an argument was made that the results achieved through Sapphire’s specialism did not bring the expected results, although its alleged ineffectiveness was never methodically evidenced.

Participants’ responses shifted the focus from specialism ‘ineffectiveness’ to a shared dissatisfaction with specialist-allocated resources, organisational support for specialism at all levels, and capacity for RASSO offences when dealt with by specialist officers. For instance, some officers have reported, that RASSO training timeliness (with an overall duration of four weeks or less) is not adequate nor focused on topics like rape myths, secondary victimisation, and trauma, that could assist officers in better understanding and handling RASSO victims. Additional participants’ concerns revolved around the number of hours dedicated to specialist RASSO incidents, blurred boundaries regarding the allocation of investigations, and role expectations and pressure on specialist personnel to be available outside of working hours. Although this is the first study outlining these issues specifically, the findings are in line with a broader dissatisfaction with how RASSO is investigated and “concerns about the quality of specialist RASSO prosecution advocated” in theory, not being reflected in practice (HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate, 2016, p.10). We argue this shift in specialist focus should be considered in future research.

Overall, what emerged is that although specialist needs might have to be tailored based on the police force considered, an overall definition of what RASSO specialism should exactly imply is still

lacking. Not being able to operationally define specialism is problematic and can have a cascade effect on officers' role implications and expectations, especially for recruits who can now start as RASSO specialist detectives, without having been exposed to minimal, if any, specialist training. This emerged throughout multiple interviews and suggested that drawing lines between different specialist roles or units without any organisational guidance may be difficult. Operational unclarity around specialism also adds challenges around the differentiation of specialist approaches based on cross-force characteristics and needs and does not adequately consider the overlap between crimes like domestic abuse (DA) and RASSO, given that over 40% of DA victims are also frequently sexually assaulted by their partners (NCADV, no date). Police officers had mixed opinions on this topic, with some suggesting that better consideration is needed to avoid wasting human and financial resources after DA or RASSO crimes are reported. For some forces more than others, these overlaps resulted, in fact, in delays associated with the few available specialist officers having to attend incidents relatively last minute, and not being able to actively focus on their RASSO caseload. Interestingly, the differences across police forces responses for each theme, although acknowledged, were not seen as an obstacle to specialism implementation, but rather as a characterisation of how policing evolves and adjusts in a territory as vast as England and Wales. Agreeing, Ludwig *et al.* (2017, p.7) mentioned how “there is nothing that defines policing like a difference”.

Lastly, low resources, inadequate training, and low priority to specialism have also been negatively affecting officers' well-being and satisfaction, in a recurrent comparison between what specialism used to bring in the past and the amount of uncertainty that they perceive presently, around specialist roles being taken for granted or decontextualised. The need for more specialist training as a potential protective factor for officers' well-being has also been more generally acknowledged as part of OSB findings (Stanko, 2022), but more research is needed to quantitatively measure police specialism impact on officers investigating RASSO.

Future research and limitations

The study described officers' insights into how specialism develops and manifests itself in their respective police forces. While the findings provide an accurate account of participants' responses, its

implications need to be contextualised in that only four out of 43 police forces in England and Wales are represented here. Even though most of the findings are in line with the existing evidence base, the researchers acknowledge that non-captured variations in the forces that did not take part in the study are possible. For instance, force-specific and territorial differences, which are already known to affect resource distributions, support available to personnel, and caseload, might also influence police officers' overall perceptions and lived understanding of specialism.

It is also worth highlighting that participants were not asked to elaborate on specialism only, but more to freely contextualise day-to-day challenges associated with the investigations they conduct, their roles within the team, and to comment on the overall organisational climate. Although this does not undermine the findings, more tailored research on the topic is required to fully explore its depth, especially for what concerns evidence-based measurements of specialism effectiveness. While Template Analysis granted greater flexibility during the coding of officers' responses, the themes' patterns were built across transcripts as opposed to within a single transcript, leading to the unavoidable loss in the holistic understanding of each account (Brooks *et al.*, 2015). This limitation did not impact, however, the quality of the coding process, as an in-depth understanding of individual transcripts was beyond the scope of the paper.

Future research should focus on the identification of detailed parameters and operational definitions of specialist roles, training, and units in policing. Additional qualitative and quantitative insights on whether and how specialism can improve RASSO investigations, victim engagement, and officers' well-being in practice are also needed. Some of the complexities around the relationship between specialism and capacity, job satisfaction, and organisational support could also be explored in future research, to shed light on the evidence-based mechanisms that could assist with specialism maximisation in policing for RASSO offences and beyond.

Lastly, when considering the role of specialism in policing more broadly, the study did not capture the perspective of specialism of crimes different than RASSO offences; there may be offence-specific differences related to the utility and practical application of specialism in these contexts which could also be investigated in future work. Future work could also consider the reasons why specialism seems to have progressed in certain areas of policing and not others, and the barriers and challenges to

implementing specialism within this wider cultural context. At present, no academic research dug specifically into why RASSO specialism in England and Wales is so underdeveloped, nor have focused on why rape and sex offences receive minimal attention compared to other crime types, despite being so widespread in the general population. These dynamics are, however, being captured as part of ongoing research on the topic, in the attempt to produce an evidence-based baseline for the effectiveness of RASSO specialism in policing.

Conclusion

The study showed that police officers are presently unsatisfied with how police specialism is operationalised and funded at force-level, despite having highlighted positive past and prospective effects of specialism for the investigation of RASSO offences. Delays occurring at a reporting stage can hinder the optimal window of evidence availability, which might result in victims feeling less supported or prioritised. Interviewed officers suggested that specialism should be prioritised to address this, as well as help officers refine their knowledge of RASSO dynamics, increase their investigative competence and make their caseloads more manageable. We argue that for specialism to be successfully implemented, especially in relation to officers' well-being, managerial and organisational support also needs to be present.

Declarations

Consent to Participate and Publish

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study as part of OSB. They also agreed that the anonymised and redacted version of their interviews could be used for publication purposes.

Conflict of Interest and Funding

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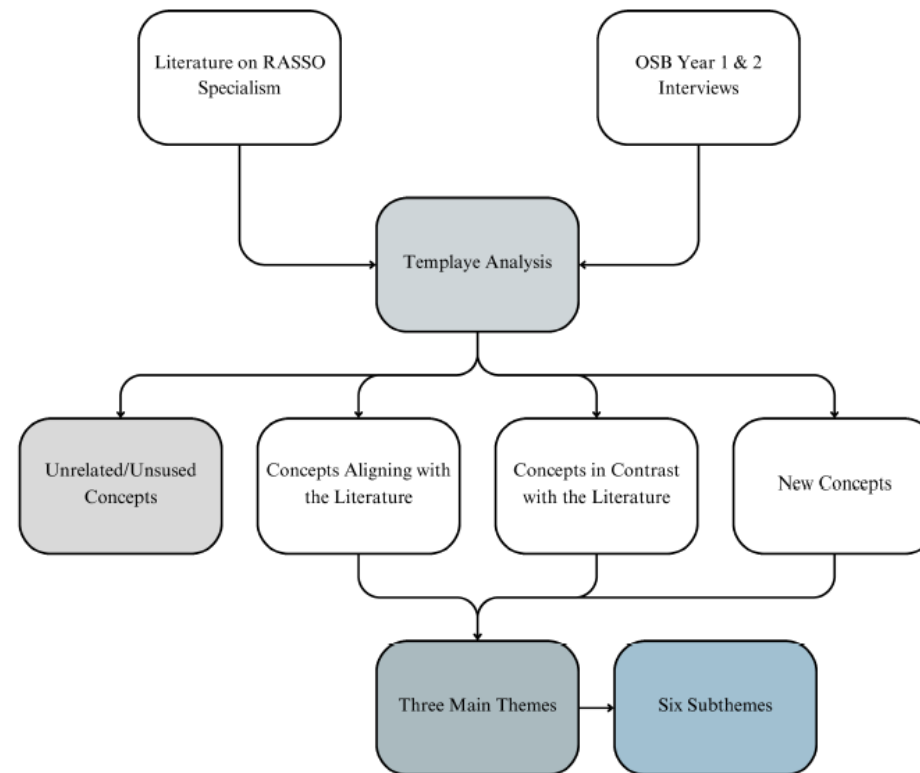


Figure 1. Breakdown of the Template Analysis conducted.
Source: Created by the authors.

Tables

Table I. *Main themes and sub-themes and corresponding descriptions related to police specialism*

Main Themes	Sub Themes	Description
1. Potential Impact of Specialism in Policing	1.1. Better caseload and investigation management	The theme is about police officers' insights on the perceived influence of having dedicated RASSO specialist units, skills, and training as part of their police forces, compared with non-specialist investigative approaches.
	1.2. Perceived improvements in crime response and victim support	
2. Police Specialism in Practice	2.1. Focus on RASSO-only investigations varies by police force	This theme focuses on the practical implications of specialism in the day-to-day job of a police officer. It sheds light on common considerations across police forces when introducing elements of specialism.
	2.2. A lack of specialist personnel leads to delays in RASSO-specific responses to crime	
3. Organisational and Training Concerns	3.1. High demand, scarce resources, and low priority	The theme shows officers' perspectives on the main factors that are hindering an optimal development of RASSO specialism, and its impact on officers' work, wellbeing, and capacity.
	3.2. Different outlooks on the effectiveness of specialist training	

Note: this table is the property of the authors.