

Internet intelligence profiles and policing legitimacy

Evaluating the impact of 'overt' and 'covert' profiles in internet intelligence and investigation deployments on police legitimacy and compliance with National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) guidance.

Key details

Lead institution	University of West London
Principal researcher(s)	Liam Cahill
Collaboration and partnership	<p>Bursary recipient from the College of Policing and Metropolitan Police Service.</p> <p>Working in partnership with the NPCC lead for internet intelligence and investigation.</p>
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	September 2021
Date due for completion	July 2025

Research context

Internet intelligence and investigation (i3) is a constantly developing arena for policing. Balancing investigative opportunities with a need to respect the public's privacy and maintain legitimacy is complex. To assist i3 practitioners, the NPCC issued guidance in 2018 (updated in 2020) around the use of 'overt' and 'covert' profiles in online deployments.

Through a thorough literature review and evaluation of the national policy, research questions evolved as to evaluate the strategy and how 'overt' profiles ensure police legitimacy.

Consequently, the following research questions were established.

1. How are i3 practitioners employing 'overt' profiles as an operational tactic to conduct internet intelligence and investigation deployments?
2. What are the operational circumstances where an 'overt' profile offers a tactical advantage over a 'covert' profile?
3. What impact does the NPCC's internet intelligence and investigation governance on 'overt' and 'covert' profiles have on 'internal' and 'external' police legitimacy?

The research questions form the foundation of the aims and objectives of this research. The aims are to:

- understand the effectiveness of current policy and tactical advice in the deployment of 'overt' profiles
- establish whether they are being utilised by (i3) practitioners across the country

The goal is to comprehend the broader context in which 'overt' techniques affect police legitimacy – both externally with the public and internally in the context of police governance, transparency, and accountability.

The evidence will form recommendations for the NPCC to consider in their evaluation of national i3 guidance.

Research methodology

A 'pragmatic', methodological framework that supports the use of a mixed-methods approach and complements the research objectives serves as the foundation for this study.

This study will use a design called 'convergent triangulation'. This includes focus groups, an online survey, and semi-structured interviews.

Focus groups

A purposeful selection criterion will make sure that people with different levels of experience and knowledge contribute to the discussion. Four focus groups will consist of ten people each. These are anticipated for early 2024.

Online survey

The sample size is about 12,000 operational i3 practitioners. The survey will allow practitioners to anonymously provide valuable insight into their operational practices and reasoning. Survey deployment is anticipated for early-mid 2024.

Semi-structured interviews

A purposeful selection process will facilitate 10 interviews with department heads across the country. A final interview will be conducted with the NPCC lead to understand the national strategy. Interviews will take place in mid-2024.

Analytical overview

The results will use a 'thematical' approach to interpret the qualitative and quantitative data together.

A descriptive statistical analysis will be utilised for the quantitative data, which will comprise categorical statistics (nominal and ordinal data types) captured in the survey.

Inferential statistics will be used to infer the sample data against the national population of i3 practitioners, providing generalisations about the community.

Using the confidence interval for the quantitative survey data – together with the qualitative data from the open survey questions, focus groups, and interviews – a 'thematical' analysis will be conducted to identify important trends in the data.

These will provide depth of meaning and assist in contextualising the varying paradigms that surround the subject. The results will be presented in a concurrent format, equally weighted, with identified themes from the research used to interpret the combined qualitative and quantitative data.

Interim reports or publications

It is anticipated that a law enforcement only interim report will be available around August 2024, once the data has been collected across the three phases of the research and an initial analysis has been conducted.

The full thesis will be reviewed prior to publication to ensure suitability for publication. If appropriate this will be published in late 2025.