

Exploration of the occupational choices of women detectives and the links to the gender division of labour within police detective specialisms

A multiple-case study involving five forces in England and Wales, incorporating qualitative interviews and questionnaire research.

Key details

Lead institution	University of Derby
Police region	East Midlands
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	September 2022
Date due for completion	September 2030

Research context

Since the turn of the century, policing in England and Wales has consistently experienced vacancies among several detective specialisms. Policing has also been an example of gender inequality, and a culture that has traditionally isolated women, and deployed them within gender specific roles. Policing now faces increasing scrutiny around violence against women and girls, and its response to the surge in these offences.

Examination of the current empirical knowledge base around the gender division of labour within detective specialisms identifies clear gender segregation in role specification within policing, and society. Cultural factors, including societal, occupational, and organisational, are all contributing factors. However, there is a lack of contemporary research within live operational detective settings.

This study provides contemporary research in an under-studied area, building on previous research conducted by the researcher in 2021-22. The unpublished MSc case study of one force identified advancement barriers for female officers considering a career in the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), and preferences within the sample for other detective roles. This study could not fully determine why alternative detective roles were more attractive, and the single case prevented generalisation of the findings.

Study aims

To identify whether there is gender disproportionality within detective roles, and the factors that influence possible gender divisions of labour in these roles.

Research objectives

- To understand previous and current research around the occupational choices made by women detectives, and the gender division of labour in police detective roles.
- To identify the current gender division of labour within detective specialisms.
- To identify and understand the specific detective specialisms that are desirable to female detectives.
- To establish what factors inform the occupational choices made by female detectives around detective specialisms.
- To identify detective roles that may experience gender inequality in the future.

Research methodology

Design

This multiple-case study will involve five constabularies. An evidence-based approach will inform and test each research stage, incorporating a sequential mixed-methods design, integrating pilot interviews and focus group research (exploratory stage), qualitative interviews (phase one) and quantitative research (phase two). A literature review will identify theories, relevant research, and knowledge, augmented by primary workforce demographic data from each participating constabulary.

Method

Exploratory enquiries

Exploratory research will incorporate pilot interviews and focus groups of the first force to generate theories, and allow the testing of interview techniques, recording and transcription of methods. The data generated will inform a literature review around known theories, and previous case studies. Participants will be selected through purposive, and snowball sampling methods.

Phase one (qualitative)

Face-to-face or online interviews will be conducted with approximately 25 anonymised volunteers from each case (or until saturation point). Interviewees will be recruited via purposive or snowball sampling, advertisements within each force, or suitable external agencies. Interviews will be recorded, and transcripts analysed thematically to identify theories and themes. Interviewees may be re-contacted to clarify salient points.

Phase two (quantitative)

Quantitative research will be conducted through a predominantly closed-question questionnaire, which will include some open-ended questions to allow participants to develop replies. The questionnaire will be designed from data generated within the study, and following pilot testing, distributed electronically via Microsoft Forms software, testing theories identified within phase one. Participants will be recruited through advertisements within each force or suitable external agencies. Participation will be voluntary and anonymous.

Analysis and conclusions

All data will be tested against literature review findings, with further research of literature challenging or substantiating conclusions. Mixed methods data, and workforce demographic data will be analysed, and force-specific case reports produced, with in-depth analysis of all findings discussed within the final thesis.

Target sample size

Qualitative phase

Approximately 25 women detective constables will be required within each of the five forces (yet to be decided organisations) for qualitative interviews.

Quantitative phase

20/02/2026

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A minimum of 50 women detective constables in each of the participating organisations.