

Impact of specialism in England and Wales: an online survey

Measuring the impact of specialism on police officers' wellbeing, perceived competence and organisational support

Key details

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Police region	Eastern
Collaboration and partnership	Prof Miranda Horvath, Dr Kari Davies and Dr Mark Manning
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	January 2024

Research context

Research evidence suggests that the effectiveness of police specialism is speculative, with little information to guide the distribution of resources towards certain specialisms (Byrne and Marx, 2011). One of the biggest challenges for police specialism in England and Wales appears to be the lack of a strong and validated research framework providing guidance about what specialism is and should imply (Lloyd and Burman, 1996; Weston, 2009). In addition, enhancements in specialism do not seem to be followed by greater role clarity and support. This means there is a mismatch between officers being asked to provide specialist skills, and organisational contexts that fail to support specialism by explaining its content, expectations and the availability of training (HM Government, 2023; The Police Foundation, 2019).

The research literature also shows there is a lack of detail around how specialism is presently intended, contextualised or developed, hinting that specialism itself is hardly discussed and taken for granted. In the absence of guidance, police officers in both specialist and non-specialist units are frequently expected to be 'specialists' but are left with no support to maximise their specialist skills (Schelfhauert and Crittenden, 2005). Wigert and Agrawal (2018) indicated that lack of clarity on the role and career path, alongside unrealistic performance expectations and excessive workload, are some of the major causes of burnout in the workplace. No previous study has quantitatively investigated the impact of specialism directly from police officers. This proposed study will help illuminate the cultural and organisational dynamics that support or undermine policing specialism, adding valuable insights on its usefulness and impacts.

Research methodology

An online survey has been selected as the most relevant methodology for this study. This is because, as supported by Regmi and others (2016), surveys are easily accessible and cost-effective tools that allow for the collection of data from vast groups of participants that are generally inaccessible, in a relatively fast timeframe.

In this case, the aim of the study is to collect as much information as possible on the impact of specialism from as many police officers across England and Wales. The survey will take no longer than 30 minutes to complete and will include an information sheet highlighting the purpose of the request, its rationale and a consent form. Data collection will be anonymous. Participants are not required to answer all the questions, however, any contribution towards the research is extremely valuable. Validated scales have been used for the creation of this survey. Police officers of any range of expertise and specialism are invited to take part. We also welcome insights from retired police officers.

Summary of findings

This project was completed in August 2025.

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