

Working in the economic crime unit

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Spotlight on a role: detective constable in the Economic Crime Unit

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I'm a detective constable in the Economic Crime Unit's (ECU) High Harm team. I've been in the unit for the past seven years. If you'd told me I'd end up in economic crime, I'd have laughed – mainly because maths was never my strong point. Before this I was a fraud investigator at a bank and my family tree is made up of accountants (Christmas parties are exciting in my house), so maybe it was my destiny after all.

In all seriousness, working in economic crime is incredibly rewarding. Do criminals worry about going to prison these days? Maybe. But do they freak out when you take away all their assets? Absolutely.

Economic crime teams

People always ask what an economic crime officer does. Sure, I could say 'we investigate fraud', but that's like saying bakers just make bread. The Surrey/Sussex Police ECU department is divided into three exciting areas.

1. The Investigation team

This team tackle things like commercial fraud (insurance fraud/money laundering), organised crime, bribery, corruption and election fraud. They fight for convictions, recover assets and compensate victims.

2. The Recovery of Assets Investigation and Disruption (RAID) team

This team is made up of treasure hunters, using financial intelligence and Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 powers to recover assets. They're the ones who could probably find a penny in your couch from another room.

3. The High Harm team

This is my stomping ground. We deal with romance and courier frauds, going after scammers who prey on the vulnerable.

All these areas include a mixture of detectives and police staff who are trained as financial investigators.

As a team, we partner up with agencies such as Trading Standards, the Financial Conduct Authority and HM Revenue and Customs (to name a few) to maximise the disruption to the criminals.

Romance fraud case study

I recently worked on a romance fraud case whereby two suspects were part of an organised crime group I'd been chasing for the last few years, whose scams had racked up millions of pounds. The main suspect, along with his partner, was using online dating sites to swindle men he had targeted online. His partner helped him craft the perfect love letters to victims and exploit them for over half a million pounds.

From an evidence standpoint, this case was a dream. We found the phones used to message the victims in the suspect's house, with pictures on his girlfriend's phone of him using the devices. The money was conveniently going straight into his bank accounts and was being used for things like expensive gym memberships and dental work.

We also found chats on his personal phone, where he was giving fraud tips to additional suspects overseas. The icing on the cake? A voice note where the suspect said, 'Remember, you don't ask for money right away. First, make them fall in love with you. Then you tell them your mum's sick and just died of cancer, and ask for money for the funeral.' Conveniently, this was the same story the victims had been told.

Despite all this evidence, the suspect and his partner decided to plead not guilty until day two of the trial when reality finally hit. The suspect was sentenced to eight years in prison, which means one less romance scammer on the streets.

Become a detective

Think you've got what it takes? These are the skills you need:

- detective skills, enthusiasm and maybe a few good accounting jokes to keep the office lively
- empathy in victim care is key
- an investigative mindset, with the ability to crack complex cases without losing your cool
- the ability to think globally rather than locally and to be at the forefront of change, be that crypto, AI, deep fakes – technology is constantly evolving after all

There are plenty of ways to enhance your detective skills. You could take the financial intelligence officers exam and complete a portfolio to get that accreditation. There's also the specialist fraud investigators course, money laundering course, and bribery and corruption course. These are available through the City of London Police Economic and Cyber Crime Academy. You don't need to be a maths wizard to succeed here; I had a maths tutor and still occasionally count on my fingers.

Figures

What I love most about the role is helping vulnerable victims. Fraud accounts for over 40% of reported crimes and that figure is ever increasing. The reality is there are two types of people in this world: those who have been targeted by scammers and those who will be soon.

Finally, some stats for you because it wouldn't be an ECU piece if there weren't stats. In 2023/24, 8,792 romance frauds were reported to the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau, run by the City of London Police, resulting in losses of more than £94 million.

So, if you're considering a role in an ECU, my advice is simple: do it. You can really make a difference to protecting victims from callous scammers and it's a department where everybody counts.

- Peer reviewed by Detective Superintendent Richard Sinclair, City of London Police

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