

Analysis of the implementation and operational delivery of the Kent Internet Risk Assessment Tool, local professional judgement and alternative practices that are used for prioritising demand and managing risk

National mixed methods research into the use of risk assessment tools and professional judgement in police decision making.

Key details

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Police region	West Midlands
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	February 2024
Date due for completion	February 2030

Research context

The internet and rapid expansion of technology have fundamentally reshaped the landscape of criminality, creating new opportunities for harmful and deviant behaviours online (Holt and others 2017). Among the most serious of these behaviours is the possession, production and distribution of indecent images of children (IIOC), the prevalence of which has exponentially grown alongside advancement in peer-to-peer networks and encryption (Quayle and Taylor 2002, Global Alliance 2023, Krone 2004). In the United Kingdom, the National Crime Agency (NCA) continually refers unprecedented volumes of IIOC cases to local police forces for investigation (NCA 2023). The impact of these behaviours creates a significant challenge for law enforcement agencies,

particularly around decision-making when prioritising demand and assessing risk.

The Kent Internet Risk Assessment Tool (KIRAT) was introduced into policing to meet this challenge, enabling local forces to prioritise referrals by identifying those suspects who may pose an elevated risk of committing contact sexual offences against children (Long and others 2013, Long and others 2014). However, there are significant limitations that undermine the KIRAT as it was designed only for adult males suspected of IIOC offences and it does not routinely account for contextual information such as access to children, requiring the application of professional judgement by decision-makers to resolve ambiguity (Long and others 2016, Skidmore and others 2022). Furthermore, police forces frequently supplement the use of KIRAT with localised tools and systems, resulting in nationally inconsistent approaches by police forces and potentially indefensible decision-making (HMICFRS 2023).

This research will specifically examine how, in the current national operational and theoretical landscape, the KIRAT and professional judgement interact within the decision-making process when assessing risk and prioritising IIOC demand in British police forces.

Research methodology

Phase one

This research is structured around a sequential mixed methods approach. The first phase will employ a national online survey targeted at departmental leadership (Detective Inspector or equivalent) of the unit responsible for managing child sexual abuse material (CSAM) referrals. This will elicit data on the current distribution and use of KIRAT and provide an understanding of what forces do currently. Data analysis will use descriptive and inferential statistics to map national trends. The findings from phase one will inform the selection of participants for the second phase, which will seek to engage a breadth of force approaches.

Phase two

The second phase of the research will consist of a qualitative, in-depth inquiry through semi-structured interviews with the sample group identified from phase one. This approach has been chosen to facilitate exploration of practitioners lived experiences, understanding and approaches to decision-making when dealing with IIOC cases. It will provide data on the reality of how decision-

makers balance risk assessment tools with their professional judgement. Thematic coding will be used to analyse the responses, identifying themes that will provide a rich understanding of the 'how' and 'why' behind decision-making. The interviews will target those who in reality make the decisions (Detective Sergeant or equivalent).

A mixed methods design harnesses the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches while mitigating their individual weaknesses (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018). This approach ensures that statistical findings are contextualised, leading to interpretation that has the depth of lived experiences of the practitioners that allows for deeply grounded theoretical findings that have a strong validity (Teddle and Tashakkori 2009). This is paramount for generating actionable policy recommendations as it overcomes mono-methodological limitations and provides findings that are both statistically supported and experientially validated, addressing the complex policy questions within criminal justice (Sampson 2017).

References

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