Review and process evaluation of AI digital investigation tools

A review and process evaluation of AI investigation tools used in policing aimed at documenting their comparative purpose, functionality and intended outcomes.

Key details

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Police region	West Midlands
Collaboration and partnership	• Crest Advisory
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	January 2026
Date due for completion	April 2026

Research context

The Centre for Police Productivity is a national hub for supporting forces to implement new approaches and technologies to improve productivity. The Centre supports forces to use data, innovation and technology to accelerate and automate policing activity. This frees up police officer and staff hours for policing activity that keeps our neighbourhoods safe.

The Centre is helping forces build AI capability, while identifying applications that could deliver real operational benefits. As part of this work, the Centre has committed to an evaluation of AI digital investigation tools.

AI digital investigation tools have the potential to increase investigative capabilities in policing, make processes more efficient and increase officer wellbeing. Policing has been adopting AI digital investigation tools at a rapid pace, with different forces developing and adopting different solutions. While capabilities can differ between tools, most focus on processing, linking and organising data, with some tools also having transcription and translation capabilities.

Some internal evaluation and benefits measurement on AI digital investigation tools has been undertaken by forces, with most suggesting positive productivity outcomes. However, while tools have either been evaluated or their time or cost savings captured, there is a need for more robust impact evaluation to inform future decisions and wider adoption. This project seeks to capture and understand use of AI digital investigation tools to date and develop options for future impact evaluation.

Aims

The aims of the digital investigation tool evaluation are to:

- understand the comparative capability of AI digital investigation tools
- determine the financial and operational costs of implementation
- understand the potential benefits, specifically considering direct efficiencies and impact on operational outcomes
- understand the key implementation issues and lessons for future delivery
- develop standardised measures and guidance for future impact or outcome-focused evaluation of digital investigation tools

Research methodology

The evaluation will assess the use of digital investigation tools in a small group of forces which have yet to be determined. The evaluation will undertake the following:

Evidence review

An evidence review of existing project, benefits and evaluation documentation to:

- compare the functional capabilities and costs of AI digital investigation tools

- synthesise, identify, define and evidence (qualitatively or quantitatively where possible) potential productivity and operational investigative outcomes and impacts of different tools

Theory of change

Develop a theory of change for AI digital investigation tools to:

- agree and define immediate and longer-term outcomes, impact measures and benefits
- inform decisions for the selection of specific use cases to undertake impact evaluation on and determine appropriate evaluation methods

Process evaluation

A process evaluation to:

- understand implementation conditions in each force and across policing
- provide lessons and guidance for future implementation decisions

Guidance and options

Create guidance and options for future impact or outcome-focused evaluation design by identifying:

- how the costs, outcomes and impacts of AI investigation tools can be determined, measured and evaluated consistently between different platforms
- any other gaps in the currently literature and proposing how these can be addressed