

An investigation into the underrepresentation of ethnic minority officers in specialist units within the UK police service

Project examining the under-representation of ethnic minority officers in specialist units within the UK police service.

Key details

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Police region	East Midlands
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Research context

Background

Despite legislative reform, successive inspection reports and repeated diversity commitments, ethnic minority officers remain significantly under-represented in specialist units. Existing research highlights that institutional barriers, cultural exclusion, disproportionate complaints or misconduct proceedings and limited diversity initiatives contribute to this disparity (Afful, 2018; Casey, 2023; Cox and others, 2023; Newiss and others, 2025).

While workforce data identifies clear disparities in the presence of ethnic minority officers in these settings, the causal mechanisms that produce such under-representation remain under-researched

(Home Office, 2026). Although initiatives such as the Police Race Action Plan (PRAP) have been implemented to improve representation, challenges remain in recruitment, promotion and retention of ethnic minority officers in specialist units (College of Policing, 2022).

Research aims

The current study explores the under-representation of ethnic minority officers in police forces in the UK. Under-representation of ethnic minority officers is defined as a disproportionate shortfall in their presence compared to their representation in the wider police workforce and the populations served (Home Office, 2026).

Objectives

Considering these questions, this study aims to identify gaps in the existing research. These questions critically explore the under-representation of ethnic minority officers in specialist units, which may impact operational policing. Thus, the objectives of this study are:

- to identify the perceptions and experiences of officers belonging to ethnic minorities relating to entering or being in police specialist units
- to critically investigate the impact of policies and diversity initiatives on the recruitment and retention of ethnic minority officers in specialist units in the UK
- to critically explore any cultural, organisational and systemic factors that contribute to the under-representation of ethnic minority officers within specialist units
- to identify best practices and make proposals to improve the progression of ethnic minority officers in UK specialist units

Research methodology

A qualitative approach is used in this study since the experiences, meanings and mechanisms underpinning structural inequality in specialist units are not easy to quantify (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Mason, 2002). Qualitative approaches are crucial to study views and attitudes, especially for hard-to-reach populations such as ethnic minority officers (Bachman and Schutt, 2019). This study intends to analyse the perspectives and experiences of ethnic minority officers working inside specialist units, using the dual-lens method of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and critical realism (CR), consistent with the critical realism ontology. Officers' accounts provide

empirical evidence for the structural conditions and generative mechanisms that produce underrepresentation in specialist units, moving beyond descriptions of individual experience to causal, structural explanations (Bhaskar, 2008; Danermark and others, 2002).

Semi-structured interviews will be the main data collection method for this study. This method is crucial for generating rich, detailed, first-person accounts of experience without being constrained by specific categories for developing meanings in participants' lives (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022).

The integration of IPA and CR in this study offers several advantages by building on these philosophical foundations. As noted above, phenomenological research focuses on the lived experiences of individuals, allowing researchers to explore the perceptions of officers of ethnic minorities about their career progression and inclusion in specialist units (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022). Second, the phenomenological approach provides a closer look at the officers' interpretation of their organisational experiences. This multi-lens approach provides a comprehensive analysis to identify officers' experiences and the systemic factors that contribute to them.

Research participation

The sample size is between 20 and 30 participants, serving and retired ethnic minority and non-ethnic minority police officers from the ranks of constable to chief inspector, from three police forces and professional policing networks.

References

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