

Overburdened and undervalued: inside the world of modern detectives

Authors: Adrian James and Richard Carr, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool Centre for Advanced Policing Studies

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The world of detective work has long been romanticized as one of intrigue and intellect, where officers use their knowledge and skills to untangle webs of deceit to deliver justice for victims. Yet, our research reveals that today behind this façade, lies a profession grappling with significant challenges. By interviewing detectives and investigators from five police forces in England and Wales, our research sheds light on the realities of modern investigative work and the systemic hurdles faced by investigators.

Detective work begins with a sense of purpose. Increasingly detective vacancies are being filled by those employed via direct entry or fast track schemes. Lacking that traditional 'apprenticeship' in policing, novice investigators enter the field motivated by a desire to make a difference, to help victims, and to build meaningful careers for themselves. However, many quickly find themselves disillusioned. High workloads, inadequate mentoring, and the overwhelming demands of balancing professional, academic, and personal lives while trying to find their feet in the high pressure investigative milieu, can erode their initial enthusiasm. A recurring theme is that, lacking a grounding in police work, many new detectives 'don't know what they don't know,' because they have been thrown into the deep end without sufficient support or preparation.

Attrition is greater in some forces than in others, as are long-term sickness levels, but simply resigning from the job, or looking to take a break from it, are not the only coping mechanisms that new detectives employ. For some, the lack of preparedness pushes them to seek promotion or specialisation as a way to escape the pressures of frontline investigative work. Officers who follow either of those paths are not lost to the service but they are lost to those areas of investigation with the greatest need; safeguarding and main CID roles. Of course, that relatively new officers are able to move on so quickly suggests that all may not be well, further along the chain. Certainly, detectives told us that posts in the more specialised areas of investigation, customarily filled by experienced peers, increasingly are taken by detectives who may lack the experience 'really' needed for the role.

For experienced detectives, the outlook can be equally challenging. The profession faces a national shortage of mentors with the skills and time to guide the new recruits. This void in mentorship capacity leaves less experienced investigators leading others, creating a cycle where knowledge and best practices fail to trickle down. Even experienced detectives can be overburdened with excessive caseloads, leading to high stress levels and a diminished quality of investigations. Many of our research participants expressed frustration with being unable to do justice to their cases due to time constraints, which ultimately impacts victim support and investigative outcomes negatively.

Another notable concern is the detectives' perception of lack of parity between themselves and their uniformed colleagues. From more favourable shift patterns and pay discrepancies

to the absence of allowances, detectives feel undervalued despite the additional responsibilities they shoulder. This feeling of inequity extends beyond financial concerns, as many investigators feel their role lacks the professional respect it once commanded.

Team dynamics and workplace culture also play significant roles. A strong team ethic is often missing, exacerbated by a 'blame culture' that discourages collaboration and open dialogue. Investigators report that remote working and the physical separation from other key police functions have further weakened interdepartmental relationships, limiting opportunities to build professional rapport and shared understanding. The blurring of roles within forces is exacerbating the challenges faced by detectives, sometimes forcing them to take on cases typically managed by less specialised investigators.

This role dilution not only undermines their expertise but also limits their capacity to focus on complex or high-stakes investigations. For example we were told that in one force detectives were being assigned to shoplifting cases; an area currently under heightened scrutiny by the government. That has created a ripple effect. More serious crimes like robberies and burglaries are being delegated to response officers, which not only risks compromising the quality of those investigations but also raises questions about the effective use of specialized resources in addressing the most pressing criminal cases.

Our research highlights systemic inefficiencies in recruitment, retention, and professional development. Current training, including the PIP accreditation process, often is seen as a box-ticking exercise rather than a meaningful developmental tool. Detectives want more robust training programmes that emphasise practical, scenario-based learning and provide opportunities for continual professional growth.

Our project is far from complete. We and our colleagues at Liverpool John Moores University currently are examining whether these challenges are emblematic of peculiarly British problems or are to be found in detective departments elsewhere. Our interviews with detectives in police departments in Europe suggest that they too face challenges connected to changing demographics and societal norms and to a seemingly inexhaustible demand for their professional services.

Looking ahead, we want to map out what our research is telling us about those challenges and how they might be addressed. What we have learned already is that recruitment strategies must better prepare candidates for the realities of the role, and retention efforts should focus on fair compensation, manageable workloads, and fostering a culture of respect and support. Enhanced mentoring programmes, clearer role definitions, and streamlined administrative processes could significantly improve job satisfaction and investigative outcomes.

Detective work, as noble as its mission may be, requires systemic reforms to remain a sustainable and attractive career choice. By addressing the gaps in mentorship, training, and workplace culture, and by deploying officers to investigations commensurate with their skills, the profession can reclaim its identity as a respected pillar of justice, providing not just a rewarding career path for investigators but also better outcomes for the communities they serve.