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Caseloads, culture, and capacity: rethinking investigative policing

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ABSTRACT

Police detective functions in England and Wales are straining under converging pressures. Drawing on 45 semi-structured interviews with detectives across five police forces, this paper examines how rising caseloads, proliferating digital evidence, and attenuated supervisory support interact with the College of Policing's (CoP) Professionalising Investigation Programme (PIP). Although conceived to standardise and elevate investigative practice, more than 20 years on, PIP is experienced widely as an additional administrative weight that diverts time from inquiry, accelerates burnout, and reduces the role's appeal; a dynamic we term the paradox of professionalisation. PIP is not the source of these pressures but intensifies them, compounding the high workloads, stress, and skills shortages already undermining detective capacity. Our analysis reframes investigative capacity as a composite of experience, team stability, mentoring, and digital infrastructure rather than raw head-count. It situates detectives' concerns within evidence that police organisations worldwide are struggling to match seemingly limitless investigative demand with finite specialist expertise. The CoP's recently announced review of PIP renders these findings especially salient, positioning the study as timely empirical input for reforms aimed at sustaining investigative quality, safeguarding detective wellbeing, and restoring public confidence in criminal investigations.

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Introduction

Detective work lies at the heart of effective criminal justice delivery. Yet, across many global jurisdictions, investigative policing is under pressure (see for example: Padilla *et al.* 2023, Rostad and Langvik 2025, Kelder 2021). In England and Wales, excessive caseloads, workforce skills shortages, digital forensics delays, and procedural overload have stretched detective units to the limit. Despite strong institutional and public reliance on positive investigative outcomes, detectives' performance appears suboptimal and the systems supporting detectives and investigations seem ineffective. Accordingly, this study addresses two questions: How do detectives experience and respond to the organisational, procedural, and cultural pressures shaping contemporary investigative work, and what reforms do they believe are necessary to sustain investigative capacity and quality?

Various, oversight bodies and researchers have flagged falling detection rates (ONS 2024); inadequate investigations (HMICFRS 2025, 2025a, 2025b); deficient prosecutions (McCartney and Shorter 2023, HMCPSP/HMICFRS 2025); and victim dissatisfaction (Victims Commissioner 2024, HMICFRS 2025b) as significant areas of concern in the investigative milieu. For victim-based

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offences, the latest crime figures (ONS 2024) provide some encouragement for policymakers: the proportion thereof resulting in a charge or summons rose slightly to 5.5% in 2023/4 (the greatest increase since 2015) and outcomes were reached more quickly on average (40 days compared with 46 in the previous year). However, these modest improvements mask a more troubling reality. Rape offences took an average of 423 days to conclude and achieved charge or summons outcomes only in 2.6 per cent of cases, while violence against the person crimes saw closure times lengthen with little improvement in charging rates (Home Office 2025). Domestic abuse offences fared somewhat better than other violent crimes, with higher charge rates (6.3 per cent) and fewer cases closed due to no suspect identified, but performance in burglary and vehicle theft remained particularly weak, with charge rates of just 4.3 per cent and 2.2 per cent respectively, and the vast majority of cases closed for lack of a suspect (Home Office 2025).

A recent quantitative analysis of charge outcomes in England and Wales (Home Office 2025a) provides further context. It found that workforce stability, particularly officer experience and turnover, was more consistently associated with charge outcomes than overall headcount, and that rising crime workloads exert a suppressive effect on charging rates, especially for victim-based offences. HMICFRS reports consistently that police forces are failing communities and victims through sub-optimal investigative practices. In the last month alone it has criticised: Gwent Police for the quality of its investigative plans, its supervision of investigations, the timeliness of its investigations and its service to victims (HMICFRS 2025); South Yorkshire Police for the quality of its investigative plans, their supervision, and its services to victims (HMICFRS 2025a); and Sussex Police for its inability to consistently ensure that it carries out proportionate and timely investigations into reported crimes, and for its service to victims (HMICFRS 2025b). These findings suggest that the numerical growth in the detective ranks, which has taken place over the last 10 years (Bray 2025) is insufficient to address declining outcomes because it has not been accompanied by organisational stability, effective supervision, and meaningful support for investigators.

Further inspection evidence adds even more weight to this interpretation. HMCPSI and HMICFRS' (2025) joint review of joint case building underscores the systemic pressures undermining the quality of criminal investigations across England and Wales, highlighting overly bureaucratic processes, poor IT systems, and cultural tensions between the police and the Crown Prosecution Service that hinder case building despite successive reform initiatives. Taken together, these findings reinforce the view that investigative challenges are structural rather than individual, with profound implications for justice outcomes. Against this backdrop, this paper examines how detectives themselves experience these pressures, offering practitioner-informed insight into the realities that shape investigative capacity and outcomes.

This paper contributes new empirical insight by foregrounding in its analysis, the perspectives and lived experiences of frontline practitioners; 45 detectives across five police forces in England and Wales. In doing so, it captures how organisational churn, digital complexity, and procedural reforms have intersected to shape modern investigative work. This qualitative approach provides an original contribution to policing scholarship by illuminating how, in practice, detectives experience and navigate these compounding pressures. It explores how workforce and skills constraints, digital capability gaps, and organisational structures affect investigative resilience and morale. It centres the detective perspective as a critical lens through which to evaluate policy effectiveness, institutional capacity, and the long-term sustainability of investigative policing.

The comparative evidence cited at the beginning of this section suggests that police agencies globally are struggling to manage virtually infinite investigative demand with finite human and technological resources. This paper situates detective experience within that broader structural and transnational context. It argues that contemporary reforms focused primarily on recruitment have overlooked deeper structural issues, including detective skills shortages, the decline of experiential knowledge and mentorship, and institutional disengagement from frontline realities. The paper asks: How do detectives experience and respond to the organisational, procedural, and cultural pressures shaping contemporary investigative work, and what reforms do they believe are necessary to sustain

investigative capacity and quality? Thus, it contributes to debates on detective workforce planning, leadership, and professional development.

Since finalising this paper, the College of Policing has announced a review of the Professionalising Investigation Programme (PIP). This development underscores the timeliness of the issues raised in this paper, particularly around caseload pressures, the growing burden of digital evidence, and questions regarding the adequacy of current training and accreditation frameworks. While the scope and outcomes of the review remain to be seen, its initiation suggests institutional recognition of many of the challenges explored here.

Detectives under pressure: literature and context

We begin by examining the scale and complexity of detectives' caseloads, which underpin many of the subsequent pressures; including those linked to professionalisation. Policing literature has long acknowledged the detective role as both central and increasingly contested (Chatterton 2008, Stelfox 2012, James *et al.* 2023). Recent research depicts overburdened investigators, fragmented leadership, declining institutional knowledge, and investigations of mounting complexity (James *et al.* 2023, Home Office 2025a). By 'complexity', we mean cases such as major child sexual exploitation inquiries, organised crime investigations, or homicides involving extensive digital and forensic evidence – each requiring multi – agency coordination, specialist skills, and sustained resources far beyond routine volume crime.

The shortage of skilled detectives is not unique to England and Wales. Studies from the Netherlands (Kelder 2021), Norway (Fahsing and Ask 2013, Rostad and Langvik 2025), the USA (Padilla *et al.* 2023), South Africa (Modise 2024, Khanyile 2025), Australasia (Westera *et al.* 2016), and Sweden (Liljegren 2021) reveal three intersecting themes: excessive caseloads, wellbeing deficits, and the intensifying demands of digital evidence. International evidence highlights the emotional and cognitive toll of these conditions, linking them to burnout, attrition, and declining morale (Liederbach *et al.* 2010, Fahsing and Ask 2013). In Sweden, Liljegren *et al.* (2021) show how investigators ration workloads through internal triage systems, while in South Africa, detectives are described as 'overwhelmed, struggling with staffing shortages and rising caseloads' (Burger, cited in Khanyile 2025, p.1). These findings underline that detective resilience is not simply a matter of individual wellbeing but is shaped by organisational design, policy frameworks, and institutional investment.

In the UK, such pressures are particularly acute within core investigative functions such as CID, child protection, and volume crime teams; units lacking the resource protection afforded to major crime or organised crime squads (James and Carr 2025). Efforts to expand capacity include crime screening (Olphin and Coupe 2019). The service also has utilised fast – track recruitment (James *et al.* 2023, 2025a), and direct – entry pathways (Tong and O'Neill 2020), which have increased headcount, but significant gaps in skills and experiential knowledge remain in digital forensics, investigative reasoning, and applied decision – making (Wilson-Kovacs 2020). The growth of data – driven policing and cyber – enabled crime has reshaped expectations further, with detectives now expected to function as digital analysts, safeguarding experts, and evidential strategists; often without sufficient structured training or supervisory support (Home Office 2025).

At the same time, officer wellbeing has become a recognised priority within the Police Service of England and Wales (PSEW), with new initiatives led by the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) and Police Federation National Detectives Forum (PFNDF) seeking to mitigate the impact of overwhelming caseloads and cumulative stress (Bradley *et al.* 2023, Cox *et al.* 2024, PFNDF 2024, NPCC 2025). Yet, detection rates remain low (ONS 2024), public confidence in investigative quality continues to decline (Victims' Commissioner 2024), and independent evaluations consistently rate investigative performance as suboptimal (HMICFRS 2024, 2025a, 2025b). These indicators suggest that failing to address the cumulative pressures on detectives is not only a workforce issue but also a systemic risk for the justice process itself. Crime screening, one of the most widely used demand – management

strategies, exemplifies this dilemma; we return to its implications in a later passage on organisational inertia and reform.

Administrative pressures and their effects on investigator wellbeing

Officer wellbeing now registers as a strategic risk for the PSEW. While sickness absence is only one measure of wellbeing, fluctuations in these levels provide a valuable proxy for underlying organisational and occupational pressures. Home Office workforce returns (Home Office 2025b) illustrate the scale of the challenge. As of 31 March 2025, 3,165 full-time equivalent officers (2.2 per cent of the workforce) were on long-term sick leave, up from 2.0 per cent the previous year (itself a small increase on the year before). Rates were highest among constables (2.2 per cent) and declined with rank, though they rose across most levels; among superintendents and above, the rate increased from 1.3–1.5 per cent. Rates also were consistently higher among women (2.6 per cent) than men (1.9 per cent). Beyond long-term sickness, many officers were working below full capacity, with 3.5 per cent on recuperative duties and 6.8 per cent on adjusted duties, again with female officers disproportionately represented. Taken together, these figures point to widespread health-related strain across the organisation, forming the context within which detectives must manage heavy caseloads and rising administrative demands.

Alongside these pressures, new detectives in England and Wales face the additional requirement of achieving PIP accreditation. Introduced by the College of Policing in 2003, PIP was designed to address longstanding concerns about inconsistency and quality in criminal investigations by enhancing the professional competence of those conducting, supervising, or managing cases (UK College of Policing 2018). It was intended to formalise investigative practice, foster accountability, reduce discretion – driven errors, and strengthen integrity in investigative decision – making (Stelfox 2012). Its tiered structure sought to safeguard standards and create clearer developmental pathways for investigators. Its rationale reflected a wider imperative to restore public confidence – particularly in the wake of high-profile failures such as the Stephen Lawrence case – by embedding nationally consistent training, testing, and accreditation through the National Investigators' Exam (NIE) and the compilation of individual portfolios evidencing operational competence (McGrory and Treacy 2011, James and Mills 2012).

While PIP represented a major professionalisation initiative, critics argue that it has added bureaucratic weight without delivering clear evidence of improved competence (Ogden 2018, Tong and O'Neill 2020). The police oversight body has echoed these concerns, repeatedly questioning whether detective competence has kept pace with the demands of modern investigation (HMICFRS 2025, 2025a, 2025b). Together, these critiques point to a wider pattern in which institutional efforts at professionalisation clash with the tacit craft skills on which effective detective work traditionally has depended (Stelfox 2012, Tong and O'Neill 2020, James *et al.* 2023).

The limited number of scholarly, empirical, evaluations of PIP suggest a more complex reality (James and Mills 2012, Hurn 2018, Ogden 2018, Riley 2020). Detectives frequently describe the process as bureaucratic, rigid, and insufficiently supported, struggling to balance demanding caseloads with the extensive documentation and risk assessments required for accreditation. James *et al.* (2023) argue that these requirements absorb disproportionate amounts of time and energy that could otherwise be devoted to active investigation, while Wilson and Grammich (2024) link such pressures to case attrition, as complex inquiries are deprioritised under resource strain.

Speaking in advance of the College's wholesale review of PIP, Jamie Daniel, CoP lead for Crime and Criminal Justice Delivery, observed that many investigations have been conducted in a perfunctory way – tick boxes to get something from A to B [with] supervisors not able to get their heads up to see what matters (cited in Gibbons 2025, p.1). This diagnosis captures what we term the paradox of professionalisation: a reform designed to elevate investigative quality has, in practice, intensified workload pressures, heightened supervisory strain, and made the role less attractive, while failing to

meet the needs of stakeholders, communities, or victims consistently (as attested by the police inspectorate: HMICFRS 2023, 2024, 2025, 2024a, 2025a, 2025b).

Critics consistently highlight that PIP places undue emphasis on process over practice. Ogden (2018) found that while new detectives valued the academic grounding, they identified significant gaps between classroom learning and workplace realities, with variable supervisory support leaving some feeling isolated. Riley (2020) reported that while PIP delivered a baseline of competence, it was less effective in developing the deeper investigative skills required for covert or specialist roles, with senior officers questioning whether procedural compliance had become the dominant objective. Tong and O'Neill (2020) similarly caution that accreditation schemes risk fostering 'credentialism', in which officers are judged more by their ability to satisfy bureaucratic requirements than by their investigative acumen.

The NIE has proved particularly contentious. Designed to ensure a minimum level of investigative knowledge, critics argue that it privileges theoretical over applied skills and adds unnecessary stress to an already overstretched workforce (O'Neill 2018, Tong and O'Neill 2020, James *et al.* 2023). For many officers, passing the exam is a poor proxy for evidencing investigative capability, and its demands are difficult to reconcile with the pressures of day-to-day casework. Taken together, these findings substantiate growing calls to reassess PIP's outcomes and ensure that professionalisation initiatives support, rather than undermine, the capacity of detectives to deliver effective investigations.

Leadership and workforce development

The wellbeing pressures outlined above cannot be separated from the issues of leadership and supervision. Effective leadership is essential not only for distributing caseloads and mentoring new detectives, but also for ensuring that professionalisation initiatives such as PIP support rather than undermine investigative practice. Where leadership is weak or inconsistent, the paradox of professionalisation is intensified: detectives face mounting procedural demands without the guidance or support needed to manage them, with damaging consequences for both morale and investigative outcomes. Studies in both the UK (Salter 2019, James *et al.* 2023) and the United States (Prince *et al.* 2021) confirm that inadequately structured leadership and oversight frameworks leave detectives without sufficient direction, producing inconsistent case management strategies and contributing to investigator burnout.

In England and Wales, these rarely are the failings of individual supervisors. More often, they reflect structural and governance challenges that have proven difficult to resolve across 43 separate police forces; each with diverse stakeholders' needs and community demands (O'Reilly 2024). Many of the challenges that policing faces in this context, particularly the persistent inability to manage demand, are complex and systemic (Laufs *et al.* 2020, Cox *et al.* 2024, Fleming and Grabosky 2024) or stem from technological change beyond the service's control (Wall and Williams 2014).

Compounding these systemic pressures is the fact that many detective supervisors receive little training in investigative leadership, often entering their roles with only limited exposure to the investigative milieu (Tong and O'Neill 2020). This lack of preparation hampers their ability to manage teams effectively, provide the mentorship junior officers need, or to allocate caseloads sustainably (Salter 2019). As Hogan *et al.* (2011) note, mid – level investigative leadership posts are among the most difficult to fill, leading to gaps in supervision and a lack of continuity in case strategy. The consequences are evident: Milloff (2023) found that investigators lacking strong supervisory support reported diminished confidence, greater job dissatisfaction, and higher rates of burnout; all factors that ultimately compromise case outcomes. Taken together, we see that deficits in leadership and supervision not only undermine wellbeing and investigative capacity but also intensify the paradox of professionalisation, setting the stage for the additional workforce challenges we now go on examine.

Efforts to rebuild the detective workforce have produced a paradox: while most forces now report establishments at or near full strength, the influx of less experienced officers has diluted investigative

capacity and – coupled with limited supervisory support – has intensified the very wellbeing pressures and operational strains these reforms were designed to address. Reliable estimates of the detective workforce remain elusive. Data are not held centrally, and the Home Office's figure of 22,566 officers in 'Investigations' (15 per cent of the workforce) includes roles beyond frontline detective work (Home Office 2025b). Figures on vacancies, retention, and internal transfers are equally difficult to compile, given wide variation across forces, inconsistent recording, and limited routine sharing across the service. In reality however, in the context of this paper such statistics are of limited relevance. The central issue today is not headcount – most forces have restored establishments to nominal strength through fast – track entry schemes or compulsory postings (Bray 2025) – but the skill, experience, and support available to detectives as they navigate complex investigations.

Even so, the service should have recognised falling headcount as a warning sign far earlier. The police oversight body identified a critical shortfall in detective numbers as early as 2016 (HMIC 2016), and in 2019 warned that continued decline threatened the integrity of investigations and could depress conviction rates (HMICFRS 2019). Scholars point to multiple causes including the detective role's relative unattractiveness to patrol officers (James *et al.* 2023) and the obvious stress and burnout that deterred potential applicants from applying for the role (Milloff 2023).

To close these gaps, many forces turned to fast – track and direct entry schemes (Davies 2023), often linked to detective degree – holder programmes with additional accreditation requirements (see, for example, Avon and Somerset Police 2024). While signalling welcome institutional investment in professional development, these routes have created significant challenges for new recruits, who often struggle to balance frontline casework with the demands of PIP accreditation and degree qualifications (Tong and O'Neill 2020, James *et al.* 2023). Reforms intended to raise standards and enhance the role's appeal, paradoxically, have intensified workload pressures and made the transition into detective work more arduous; a dynamic consistent with what we have termed the paradox of professionalisation.

National initiatives have shaped this landscape further. The Home Office's Policing Uplift Programme prioritised expanding the ranks of frontline constables but overlooked acute shortages in investigative roles (NAO 2022, CoP 2023). Complementary internal efforts, led by the NPCC workforce planning team and supported by the NPCC Investigator Wellbeing and Recruitment Groups, have helped restore detective numbers (Bray 2025). It will take time for new detectives to get up to speed and thus skills shortages persist. As Mazerolle *et al.* (2022) and James *et al.* (2023) note, the investigative frontline remains relatively inexperienced and insufficiently supported.

This experience gap carries direct implications for case management, investigative effectiveness, staff wellbeing, and victim satisfaction. Though fast – track and direct entry schemes have largely addressed numerical shortfalls, they may not have prepared new investigators adequately for the demands of the role (Davies 2023, James *et al.* 2023). Research by Kelder (2021), Salter (2019), and Fahsing and Ask (2013) underscores the emotional and psychological toll of detective work and its impact on retention. Eck and Rossmo (2019) add that overburdened detectives struggle to sustain thorough investigative processes, leading to delays, procedural errors, and unsolved cases. They argue that what is needed is not further tinkering with administrative practices, but fundamental shifts in detective work that engage officers in crime prevention and problem – solving.

Methodology

To answer our research questions we conducted 45 semi-structured interviews. We employed a qualitative research design to examine how detectives experience the pressures of contemporary investigative work, including workload intensity, accreditation requirements, digital complexity, and leadership dynamics. Our goal was to explore the lived realities of practitioners working in frontline investigative roles and to capture the organisational conditions shaping their day-to-day decision-making, morale, and professional identity.

Research design and sampling

The study answered the research question: How do detectives experience and respond to the organisational, procedural, and cultural pressures shaping contemporary investigative work, and what reforms do they believe are necessary to sustain investigative capacity and quality? A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure representation from a range of organisational contexts and investigative roles. Forty-five participants were recruited from five police forces in England and Wales; one metropolitan and four county-based. The sample included: 32 PIP-accredited detectives; 13 trainee detectives; five senior officers (Inspector or above); and three civilian investigators; 26 were male and 19 were female.

Participants were drawn from Criminal Investigation Departments (CID), child protection teams, and volume crime units. The sample reflected variation in years of service, career trajectories, and investigative specialism. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently engaged in investigative work, with at least six months of experience in their current role. Recruitment was facilitated via professional networks and liaison with local gatekeepers. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were provided. All participants provided informed consent prior to interview.

This study focused on detectives working within CID, child protection teams, and volume crime units. Specialist detectives in areas such as economic crime, counter-terrorism, or serious organised crime were excluded from the sample. This decision reflected both methodological and practical considerations. Specialist officers typically enter these roles after significant frontline investigative experience and the achievement of PIP accreditation. They tend to operate in better-resourced environments, with greater access to equipment, financial and peer support, and professional autonomy than their frontline counterparts. By concentrating on those detectives most directly affected by PIP and by resource and caseload pressures, the study provides a more accurate picture of the systemic challenges shaping the sustainability of generalist investigative work.

Data collection

Data were collected between January and December 2024 using semi-structured interviews, either conducted in person or via secure digital platforms. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min and, with participant consent, were audio-recorded. The interview schedule focused on five core domains: investigative workload, accreditation and training, digital casework, leadership and support, and professional identity. The semi-structured format enabled flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring consistency across key thematic areas. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymised, and imported into NVivo for analysis.

Data analysis

Researchers used a thematic analysis approach, which drew on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. Analysis followed a hybrid deductive – inductive strategy: initial coding categories were derived from existing literature (e.g. workload, digital capability, organisational culture), but were refined and expanded based on patterns emerging from the data.

Members of the research team coded the data independently and subsequently reviewed them collaboratively to enhance analytical rigour and to address potential bias. They used reflexive memos and regular peer debriefing sessions throughout the process to interrogate assumptions, to consider alternative interpretations, and to ensure that findings remained grounded in participant perspectives. They grouped themes into five overarching categories reflecting both empirical salience and conceptual coherence. These were: investigative capacity and caseload pressures; accreditation, training, and the skills gap; digital evidence and technical preparedness; leadership, supervision, and organisational disconnect; and professional identity, wellbeing, and cultural change.

Ethical considerations and reflexivity

The research was reviewed and approved by the Liverpool John Moores University ethics committee (reference 24/LCP/009). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. All identifiable data were removed during transcription and analysis. In writing, care was taken to avoid attributing quotes to individuals in ways that could reveal personal or organisational identity.

The research team brought a range of disciplinary and professional backgrounds to the project, including experience in policing, criminal justice policy, criminology, and public sector research. They used reflective practices throughout the research cycle to consider how positionality, prior experience, and institutional knowledge shaped data collection, coding, and interpretation. The study was independently funded and conducted without institutional commissioning, ensuring analytical independence and critical distance.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study consist of interview transcripts with serving police officers. Due to the sensitive nature of the material and the conditions of informed consent, the data cannot be shared publicly. Participants provided consent for their data to be used solely for this research project and did not agree to wider sharing. To protect participant confidentiality and adhere to ethical requirements, the full dataset is not available. However, detailed methodological information, coding frameworks, and anonymised extracts of data may be provided by the authors upon reasonable request, subject to ethical approval.

Use of generative AI

The authors attest that they used ChatGPT version 4 to check for grammar and syntax errors so as to improve the readability of the piece.

Workforce strain and the changing realities of investigative policing

This section explores how rising caseloads, procedural demands, and diminished supervisory support have transformed the experience of detective work. Drawing on qualitative accounts from our sample, the subsections unpack detectives' perceptions of capacity strain, skills erosion, and institutional disengagement. While views were broadly shared across the cohort, some variations emerged along lines of experience, role seniority, and accreditation status.

Investigative capacity and caseload pressures

Similar views on capacity and caseload pressures were shared across the sample. Experienced and novice detectives alike, across all five participating forces reported that investigative workloads had reached unsustainable levels. Participants described having to manage dozens of cases simultaneously, often involving complex and high-harm offences that required time-intensive investigative work, victim care, and evidence management. For example, new Detective C6 said that the volume of the work was 'astronomical ... we just don't have the capacity to manage it'.

The volume of cases not only affected the depth and quality of investigations, but also generated a sense that detectives were permanently in triage mode, with officers compelled to make difficult decisions about which cases to prioritise. The risk of getting those decisions wrong was widely acknowledged, with officers expressing concern that the sheer weight of demand was reducing their role to reactive, administrative case processing rather than thoughtful inquiry (Detectives A2, B3, C6, D5, and E2).

Investigative capacity has been undermined further by poor resource alignment and organisational churn. Officers frequently reported that teams were inexperienced, under-resourced and

lacked continuity in staffing, which resulted in frequent handovers, interrupted investigations, and duplication of work (Detectives A1, B3, C4, D7, and E4). There was a shared sense across the whole sample that the organisation underestimated the time and expertise required to investigate crime effectively, leading to unrealistic caseload expectations and diminished professional pride in the work. Many experienced detectives felt they were no longer able to perform their roles to the standard they believed victims deserved. Detective E14 said, 'We've taken it as far as we can ... we just can't do more without [more] funding or staffing'. Detective C10 expressed a commonly held view that detectives were 'ground down. There is too much work for everybody'.

Accreditation, training, and the skills gap

For many of the newer detectives interviewed, the PIP was less a pathway to development than an additional burden, layered on top of already heavy caseloads and limited mentorship and guidance. PIP often was experienced as a burden rather than a support (new Detectives B1, C3, and E9). They said they were expected to complete a demanding portfolio of evidence of their practice, alongside full investigative responsibilities, sometimes from the first week in post. This created a dual pressure, learn quickly while demonstrating competence but without sufficient time, guidance, or supervision to do so effectively (Detectives D7, D9, and E2).

The overarching message from new detectives was that the NIE and portfolio-based accreditation process introduced additional procedural demands without sufficient operational or developmental value (Detectives B8, C5, E12). Detective C10 said that the PIP added to their already high stress level. Detectives C3 and C5, independently, described it as a 'paper exercise' that contributed little to their development. Many new detectives expressed frustration at the disconnect between what was being assessed and what was actually required for casework. Some reported deferring PIP portfolio work simply to keep up with daily caseloads, creating backlogs in accreditation that left them feeling stuck or professionally stalled. For example, new Detective E6 said they felt the service had managed the process so badly that they had been obliged to complete the portfolio in their own time, which had only added further to their stress.

Although newer detectives felt these pressures more keenly, experienced officers were keen to offer their views, reflecting not only on how accreditation burdens affected their own work and the service they could offer to their new colleagues but also on how the loss of mentoring capacity and rising procedural demands are reshaping the culture of investigation more broadly. Experienced detectives saw that in the absence of a strong mentoring culture or protected development time, new detectives struggled to gain confidence and build investigative fluency (Detectives B3, B8, and C6). That those overstretched, experienced detectives were unable to offer sustained support to their colleagues created a generational strain that mitigated efforts to pass on organisational knowledge and maintain professional standards (Detectives A2, B3, and E10). Moreover, those knowledge and skills gaps seemed to be compounded by the loss of experienced officers through retirement, promotion, or lateral movement. Researchers visited several CID teams that were dominated by investigators with less than two years' experience in the role.

Digital evidence, technology, and technical preparedness

The challenge of managing digital evidence emerged as a dominant theme. What stood out most in discussions of its collection and use was the remarkable uniformity of detectives' experiences. Unlike other aspects of the role, where perspectives sometimes varied by rank, accreditation status, or length of service, views on digital demand cut across these divides. Detectives at every stage of their careers described similar frustrations with the volume, complexity, and slow turnaround of digital material, highlighting that this challenge was not confined to new or inexperienced officers but had become a pervasive burden shaping investigative work right across the board.

Detectives reported frequent delays in accessing and analysing digital material, such as phone downloads, CCTV footage, and social media records (Detectives B6, B9, and C9). Digital evidence was not only seen as a resource issue but also as a source of psychological strain. Officers spoke of feeling overwhelmed by the volume of material they were expected to sift through without clear guidance or the appropriate tools (Detectives A2 and C9). Detectives said that in some cases, investigations stalled or collapsed because critical material could not be retrieved or processed in a timely way (Detectives D1, D9, and E2).

The absence of coherent, force-wide digital strategies was identified as a major organisational failing. Many officers felt they were navigating digital complexity largely on their own, with minimal training, unclear expectations, and few support structures. This not only undermined investigative quality but also increased the risk of error and professional vulnerability (Detectives, A2, C1, C6, and D1). Ultimately, the consistency of these accounts shows that the digital evidence burden is a systemic constraint eroding both investigative capacity and professional morale. Detectives repeatedly stressed that they felt that the absence of clear leadership, effective supervision, and organisational coordination has left them to manage this complexity largely alone; a theme that resonates strongly with the wider concerns about leadership and organisational disconnect explored in the following section.

Leadership, supervision, and organisational disconnect

While the challenge of digital evidence was described as one of the most acute operational pressures, detectives were clear that its impact was magnified by failures of leadership and supervision. Officers across all ranks and levels of experience emphasised that the absence of visible leadership, inconsistent supervisory support, and a sense of organisational disconnect, left them navigating these growing demands largely on their own. For many, this lack of direction and backing not only reduced investigative capacity but also eroded professional morale, reinforcing the perception that the system is ill – equipped to support those tasked with its most complex and sensitive work.

First-line supervisors generally were viewed positively, with many described as protective buffers between detectives and the broader pressures of organisational performance culture (Detectives C2 and D4). Newer detectives recognised that their supervisors (and mentors, where they had them) were under just as much pressure as they were. Detective E9 said that in their force, sergeants had too much responsibility; ‘too many plates to spin’ and, inevitably, that limited sergeants ability to provide the support and guidance that new detectives needed.

Perceptions of senior leadership were more critical. Participants described senior leaders, who had been posted into their roles with little or no detective experience, who were overly focused on performance metrics and, in their view, were disconnected from the realities of investigative work (Detectives A1, A2, E10 and E12). Detective D8 said, ‘You’ve got people making decisions who’ve never investigated a crime’. The situation is exacerbated by the number of temporarily promoted supervisors. Detective D8 said that having too many temporary sergeants and inspectors meant there was ‘no consistency or leadership’.

Detectives said that though not formally designated as leadership roles, detective mentors play a critically important part in supporting and shaping the development of new investigators (Detectives B4 and C2). Their influence often rivalled that of supervisors, particularly in the early stages of a detective’s career. However, many forces are struggling to provide that support because of a shortage of experience on the investigative front line (Detectives B3, C5, and C9). Faced with the challenge of finding mentors, some forces have entrusted newly accredited detectives with the role. Detective C5 said that ‘people aren’t learning from experienced people ... they are just out [of their training] and tutoring the next lot’. Detective B3 said that in their force, managers were ‘so desperate, they’ll take anybody’ as a mentor.

At the same time, more experienced detectives increasingly were relied upon to fulfil informal mentoring roles, manage team welfare, and deliver investigative results under mounting pressure.

These expectations often are layered on top of their own caseloads, creating frustration and fatigue. While some found purpose in mentoring, many felt their experience was being stretched too thin to make a sustained impact. The detectives themselves raised questions about how well prepared mentors were for the role. Certainly, some forces seemed to prepare mentors better than others. Detective B10 said that in their force, mentors do not get 'any kind of briefing or training in what it means to be a mentor'. Reflecting on their own appointment as a mentor, Detective C6 said, 'They just assumed that because I was already working in the department that I knew what I was doing. I didn't really'. Detective B1 (who had recently gained PIP accreditation and immediately been given newer detectives to mentor) said, 'I've only been working my job how I want to work it for five months ... I don't feel I've got enough experience to take on a tutee. And it's not fair on them either'.

Professional identity, wellbeing, and generational strain

Reflections on professional identity revealed a generational divide in how detectives understood both the past and present character of the role. Experienced detectives spoke with a sense of loss for the traditional prestige and values historically associated with CID, recalling an era when detective work carried clear status and professional pride. Newer detectives, lacking that same frame of reference, tended instead to describe their experience in terms of overwhelming demands on them as individuals. Despite these differences in perspective, across all ranks there was agreement that the sustainability of the role is under serious threat, with wellbeing and morale eroded by structural pressures and a perceived lack of organisational understanding.

Detectives reflected on a significant shift in the cultural identity and perceived sustainability of the role. The role is not attractive to the patrol officers from whose ranks detectives traditionally were recruited. Experienced detective E13 said, 'There's no incentive [to join CID] ... people don't want to manage risk without support'. Experienced detective E14 said that CID had 'lost its prestige'. Many newer detectives reported struggling to meet expectations placed upon them. They were required from the outset to carry significant investigative responsibility, navigate safeguarding protocols, and develop evidential strategies, all while managing accreditation requirements. This left many feeling exposed, unsupported, and emotionally overwhelmed.

Wellbeing concerns were prevalent across all ranks and levels of experience. Officers described persistent stress, mental fatigue, and a lack of time or space for recovery. Institutional responses to wellbeing were perceived as superficial or tokenistic, with little evidence of structural investment in emotional support systems or, importantly, workload moderation. Experienced detective E4 said, 'Everyone is so young ... no peers to bounce off ... I'm old enough to be their father'. A culture of stoicism and silence around distress was pervasive, further isolating officers who were struggling. Those sentiments were represented by experienced Detective E7 who said that 'detectives are broken ... muddling through ... we need specialist help, not just more people'; experienced Detective E8 who said that the 'risk of burnout was massive'; and newer Detective E10 who said the 'emotional toll was high ... [they were] taking things home ... worrying if you did the right thing'.

The overall picture revealed was of a detective function increasingly at risk. Professional pride remained strong, but was increasingly undermined by structural obstacles, excessive proceduralism, and a lack of organisational understanding of, and empathy with, detectives' plight. Many feared that, unless these pressures were meaningfully addressed, detective work would continue to lose its appeal as a sustainable or desirable career path. Taken together, these findings depict a detective function under growing strain, where professional pride endures but is increasingly undermined by unsustainable workloads, procedural burdens, and organisational neglect. These challenges, spanning issues of capacity, identity, and wellbeing, point to systemic rather than individual failings; a theme explored further in the discussion that follows. These findings suggest that the challenges facing detectives are neither transient nor easily addressed by procedural fixes, raising urgent questions about the direction of reform.

Discussion: insight to understanding

Our findings provide clear answers to both research questions. They reveal a detective function caught between the weight of tradition and the realities of modern practice. Experienced officers often framed their concerns through a sense of loss for the prestige and values historically associated with CID. Newer detectives, lacking that cultural reference point, spoke instead of feeling overburdened, exposed, and unsupported from the outset. Both groups pointed to the same conclusion: investigative policing has reached a critical juncture. In the discussion that follows, we situate these shared concerns within broader debates about investigative capacity, professionalisation, and organisational reform, asking how systemic conditions, not individual shortcomings, are reshaping the role of the detective.

This section synthesises key themes to provide a deeper understanding of how structural, cultural, and professional forces intersect in the lives of detectives. It connects individual accounts to broader debates about police reform, professional identity, and the sustainability of investigative capacity. This section explains how and why investigative practice is at a critical juncture in its development. In doing so, it outlines the emerging contours of a detective role in transition; caught between traditional ideals and contemporary pressures.

Reframing investigative capacity

Our study demonstrates that investigative capacity cannot be reduced to headcount; it depends on experience, team stability, and the organisational context that enables detectives to apply their skills effectively. Without these relational and contextual supports, numerical increases in staffing deliver limited gains. This section draws on detectives' accounts to explore how institutional definitions of capacity often overlook the relational, experiential, and contextual dimensions critical to effective investigations.

We argue that a central contribution of this study lies in its reframing of 'capacity' as a multidimensional concept. Rather than treating the detective skills shortage primarily as a recruitment problem, this research foregrounds the importance of experience, institutional knowledge, digital literacy, team stability, and emotional balance to investigative practice. As Stelfox (2012) observed over a decade ago, solving crime is not simply a function of headcount; it depends on the operational environments and cultural conditions under which investigations unfold. The accounts of detectives in this study confirm that when workloads spiral and support structures fray, even the most motivated officers struggle to deliver the quality of service the public expects.

While initiatives like the UK's Policing Uplift Programme increased recruitment figures, many detectives saw, at the same time, a hollowing-out of capability within CID teams. New detectives often are placed in demanding investigative roles without adequate preparation or support, while experienced colleagues described being unable to mentor their charges meaningfully enough because of crushing caseloads. This dynamic reflects what Chan (1996) referred to as the structural context of police practice, in which occupational knowledge is shaped by institutional priorities and resource allocation, not just by formal training. Over time, the informal learning systems traditionally associated with detective work; apprenticeship, storytelling, reflective debriefs, have been degraded or lost entirely.

The decline of mentorship and supervisory oversight has undermined detectives' ability to develop practical expertise, leaving many without the tacit knowledge and confidence levels once fostered through shared learning and close supervision. Experienced detectives repeatedly highlighted the loss of embedded learning and mentorship that once characterised the role. This section examines how depleted supervision and fragmented teams have undermined opportunities for informal development and on-the-job support.

The identification of those shortcomings are not unique to this study. Fahsing and Ask (2013), examining Norwegian and UK detectives, similarly found that experience-based reasoning and intuitive judgement (hallmarks of skilled investigators) are cultivated socially over time through exposure,

supervision, and peer engagement. The weakening of these conditions in this study suggests that the current approach to detective workforce development fails to account for the cultural and experiential foundations of investigative expertise.

Compounding the loss of professional learning structures is the perception that organisational leadership has become distant from investigative realities. While first-line supervisors (Detective Sergeants and Inspectors) often were praised for shielding teams and advocating for fairer expectations, senior leaders were frequently described as absent, target-driven, or preoccupied with reputational risk. Again, that is not a new phenomenon. This echoes concerns raised in earlier UK studies (e.g. Cockcroft and Beattie 2009), which critiqued the rise of managerialist approaches in policing that prioritise performance indicators over craft knowledge and professional discretion.

Routinely, our participants expressed frustration that strategic decisions around resourcing, recruitment, or accreditation were made without meaningful consultation. This perceived disconnect undermines institutional trust and contributes to what Lipsky (2010) described as the alienation of frontline workers; tasked with implementing policy under unrealistic conditions, they also bear the consequences when things go wrong. In the context of investigative policing, this dynamic leads to role conflict, where officers are torn between their responsibility to the institution, to victims and the bureaucratic imperative to close the file.

While accepting participants' honest belief in this narrative, the authors do not discount that the distinction they make between trusted local supervisors and distrusted senior managers might also be understood through the lens of social identity theory and occupational othering. Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) posits that individuals derive a sense of belonging and meaning from their group affiliations.

That dynamic is reinforced by patterns of 'othering', whereby organisational frustrations are attributed not to systemic constraints but to the perceived failings of distant leadership. From a policy perspective, this pattern of identity-based distancing raises critical questions about the implementation of reform within policing structures. It suggests that efforts to improve investigative outcomes must account not only for procedural and resource-based challenges but also for cultural and relational dimensions of organisational change.

Demand management and the reimagining of investigative work

Efforts to manage demand have shifted investigative practice from solving crime to rationing service, creating tension between organisational imperatives and public expectations, and leaving detectives frustrated by inconsistent prioritisation systems. Many DCs (length of service was not a factor in this context) described how pressures to manage demand, rather than solve crime, have reshaped their priorities and working practices.

We go on now to explore the cultural and operational consequences of this shift, including perceived tensions between public expectations and organisational imperatives. Drawing on data from the United States, Liederbach *et al.* (2010) recommended that detectives often spend substantial time on non-investigative tasks that could be delegated to civilian support staff. They advocate triaging cases based on solvability and harm factors, enabling detectives to concentrate on complex, high-impact investigations. These recommendations resonate with the challenges identified in the UK (some of which, such as civilianisation, have been taken up by the PSEW with only limited success; for example, experienced Police Staff Investigators in this study said they were unwilling to take a pay cut to join the detective ranks). Participants in this study told researchers that prioritisation and demand management processes were inconsistent and sometimes ineffective; suggesting that currently these endeavours best are described as 'work in progress'.

Complementing the operational perspective provided by Liederbach *et al.* (2010), Eck and Rossmo (2019) argue for a redefinition of investigative purpose. Rather than focusing solely on the mechanics of case clearance, they propose a shift toward prevention-oriented strategies, using data, crime pattern analysis, and targeted disruption to reduce repeat victimisation and

offending. Central to their approach is the development of detectives' reasoning skills and strategies for the avoidance of cognitive bias; elements that seem to be afforded a lower priority in the current UK accreditation model, the PIP.

Addressing Liederbach *et al.* (2010) concerns directly, triaging based on solvability and harm factors already is a significant element in the crime reporting system in England and Wales. Yet even though a high proportion of many crime types are 'screened out' at the first opportunity (Vickers 2024), potentially disappointing victims and reinforcing negative stereotypes of policing, participants said that these measures have done little to alleviate the burden on detectives. Experienced detectives told us that although there is widespread recognition of the need for reform, there did not seem to be an appetite in the institution for transformative change. Instead, they witnessed piecemeal adjustments that have not addressed the root causes of strain well enough.

We go on to explore how structural hierarchies and institutional inertia constrain innovation and limit the space for bottom-up change. Crime report triaging has long been contentious, criticised for the differential treatment of victims, shifting inclusion and exclusion of offence types, and the withdrawal of services from some communities, with damaging implications for public trust (Braga *et al.* 2011, UK Parliament POST 2024). Eck and Rossmo (2019) argue that such practices expose the limits of procedural fixes and the need for a more fundamental re – conceptualisation of investigative work: one that is evidence – led, analytically driven, and prevention – focused rather than case – by – case. Yet, as our findings highlight, reforms of this kind rarely gain traction within the rational – legal, hierarchical police institution.

Organisational inertia, fear of reputational risk, and chronic resource constraints all operate as powerful barriers, while reforms perceived as top – down impositions often encounter cultural resistance from detectives, who view them as undervaluing the tacit expertise built through practice. The result is that innovation is typically limited to incremental procedural adjustments rather than the transformative change envisaged by Eck and Rossmo. These patterns underscore how deeply structural and cultural factors shape the realities of detective work, raising important questions about what kinds of reforms are both possible and sustainable.

In that context, given the rapidity with which artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming so many aspects of social and professional lives, it is reasonable to speculate about how it could be applied to crime screening processes; even if it is incapable of providing the complete answer. Essentially those rely on simple sorting and filtering tasks, to deliver quicker and fairer screening decisions and more efficient use of scarce investigative resources. Though ethical questions both about the screening process and AI usage will need to be answered first. Perhaps those have best been captured by the Police Foundation (2025, p.1), which has cautioned that any police use of AI raises legal and ethical questions for the service and for society.

Accreditation as additional pressure: the operational impact of PIP

Designed to professionalise detective work, PIP often has functioned as a bureaucratic burden, especially for new recruits, intensifying stress without delivering proportional developmental benefits. This section considers how the implementation of PIP interacts with caseload pressure, training quality, and career progression.

A particularly distinctive feature of the policing landscape in England and Wales, largely absent from international comparators, is the structural embedding of the PIP. While the goal of raising investigative standards is laudable, we found that the PIP regime introduces a unique structural burden; both for novice investigators and their experienced colleagues. New detectives described the dual pressure of investigating serious offences while simultaneously preparing for assessment; often with minimal time, guidance, or protected learning space. Many felt they were expected to perform as 'fully formed' detectives from the outset, despite lacking the accumulated judgement and operational fluency that only time and mentorship can provide. As one detective put it, 'You're held to the same standard, but with half the knowledge and none of the experience'. This

seems to reinforce Fahsing and Ask's (2013) argument that investigative decision-making is fundamentally shaped by time-on-task, pattern recognition, and structured supervisory support; resources often lacking in today's PIP environment.

Meanwhile, experienced detectives, many of whom were themselves navigating higher-level PIP portfolios, reported being tasked with supporting, assessing, and safeguarding junior staff; often without a reduction in caseload or any meaningful institutional recognition. As Stelfox (2012) notes, organisational capacity is not simply about staffing levels but about the operational conditions under which expertise can be developed and exercised. In many teams, that condition appears fragile (see for example: HMICFRS 2025, 2025a, 2025b). The cumulative effect is one of unsustainable knowledge transfer, where too few experienced officers are spread too thin across growing caseloads and an influx of underprepared recruits. We argue that the drive to formalise investigative competence has undervalued tacit, experience-based skills, fostering a culture of box-ticking that risks eroding the adaptive expertise essential to effective investigations. Alongside concerns about formal accreditation, participants voiced frustration about the undervaluing of tacit investigative knowledge.

Moving on to explore the tension between formalised learning structures and the practical, experience-based skills critical to good detective work. Our findings contribute to critiques of professionalisation frameworks in UK policing. Chan (1996) cautioned that institutional attempts to formalise knowledge in policing often fail to accommodate the situational and tacit dimensions of the work. Tong and O'Neill (2020) echo this concern in their evaluation of police education reforms, suggesting that standardisation can inadvertently erode the informal, relational, and experiential aspects of police learning. This tension was evident across the sample: many of the newer officers described PIP as bureaucratically dense but pedagogically thin. These observations align with Tong and O'Neill's (2020) assessment that PIP could risk promoting procedural box-ticking over adaptive expertise.

What distinguishes the England and Wales model from international practice is the extent to which accreditation is linked to role legitimacy and operational autonomy. In contrast to countries like the Netherlands or Norway, where detective development tends to be experience-led and supervisor-mediated, PIP imposes formal gatekeeping functions that can delay, restrict, or even invalidate an officer's role performance. Several participants spoke of feeling in limbo; responsible for serious and/or high volumes of cases, but still unqualified in formal terms. This sense of mismatch between operational responsibility and institutional recognition generates considerable anxiety and self-doubt among newer detectives. These challenges are exacerbated by the broader organisational context: caseloads are too high, supervision is thin, the digital burden is expanding, and experienced officers are looking to leave for other areas of policing that they consider to be less pressured. In this environment, PIP functions less as a learning scaffold and more as a mechanism of performance surveillance that brings even more pressure to bear on new detectives.

From a policy perspective, this study calls into question whether PIP, as it currently is structured, is fit for purpose. While the principles of standardisation, quality assurance, and public accountability are sound, their application appears misaligned with the lived conditions of investigative work. The accreditation burden, when layered atop excessive caseloads, digital complexity, and (for new detectives) the attainment of a degree-level, academic qualification, may be contributing more to investigator stress and attrition than to skills development. In summary, this study suggests that the PIP system exemplifies a broader paradox in contemporary police reform: in striving to professionalise, policing has created an accreditation culture that undermines both learning and leadership. Without structural support, sufficient protected time, and investment in mentoring capacity, PIP risks compounding the very workforce pressures it should have addressed.

Digital burden and investigative overload

The exponential growth of digital evidence has become a universal and overwhelming challenge, undermining investigative efficiency and morale, and exposing systemic failures in strategy, training, and support. The rapid expansion of digital evidence has fundamentally changed the landscape of

investigation. This section examines how detectives navigate the growing volume and complexity of digital material, often without the time, tools, or training required.

The growing burden of digital evidence also was identified as a significant source of strain and inefficiency. Officers in the DC and sergeant ranks described being inundated with mobile phone data, CCTV footage, digital downloads, and social media records; without adequate time, tools, or forensic support to manage them effectively. This reflects findings by Wilson-Kovacs (2020), who argued that technological expansion in policing has outpaced the institution's capacity to manage it. Westera *et al.* (2016) similarly showed that exposure to large volumes of digital material can lead to decision fatigue and investigative drift, particularly when officers are not supported by specialist teams or digital triage protocols.

This study adds a more detailed picture of how the absence of a coherent digital strategy affects frontline investigators. Participants described having to manually trawl through gigabytes of data, often without knowing what they were looking for or how best to present it evidentially. New and experienced detectives alike said that they lacked basic training in digital evidence handling and several reported that mistakes, such as missing key metadata, had undermined case progression or, worse, jeopardised prosecutions (phenomena also identified by McCartney and Shorter 2023). This not only speaks to inefficiency but also to risk. The increasing centrality of digital material in crime investigations means that failures in this domain can have serious implications for procedural justice and public confidence.

Moreover, the digital burden was not experienced in isolation. It interacted with caseload intensity, administrative expectations, and accreditation pressures in ways that made investigative work feel overwhelming. Many officers described how these intersecting demands curtailed their ability to engage empathetically with victims, to explore alternate lines of enquiry, or to pursue leads proactively. This reinforces the idea, explored by Westera *et al.* (2016), that over-bureaucratisation and technological overload reduce the space for cognitive flexibility; ultimately leading to more formulaic, less creative investigations.

The erosion of the detective's professional identity

Beyond operational challenges, many participants described a cultural erosion of the detective role itself. Naturally, longer serving respondents (10 + years) were more likely to express nostalgia for the old CID culture. This section explores how they perceived a weakening of professional identity as a consequence of declining prestige, limited autonomy, and shifting institutional priorities.

The perceived loss of the traditional detective identity was one of the clearest threads in the interview data. This section explores how participants described the changing status, values, and sense of purpose within CID, and situates those perceptions within a longer historical arc of occupational decline. Drawing on classic studies of detective culture, it considers how the prestige once attached to investigative roles has been replaced by frustration and fatigue; particularly among more experienced officers.

Where the role was once seen as a prestigious, purpose-driven specialism, many participants now viewed it as unsustainable and unrewarded. Longer serving detectives spoke with one voice, describing a growing sense of detachment from the traditional prestige and purpose of CID roles. Historically, detectives have occupied a privileged place within police culture, often portrayed as elite problem-solvers endowed with discretion and authority. Hobbs (1988) depicted detectives as entrepreneurial figures embedded within networks that afforded them both autonomy and prestige. Young (1991) similarly highlighted the symbolic status of the CID, while Innes (2003) documented how homicide detectives, in particular, cultivated a mystique tied to their investigative craft and cultural capital. Against this backdrop, the accounts in this study suggest a marked decline in status and professional identity. Where detectives were once viewed, and viewed themselves, as autonomous and culturally distinct, many now described themselves, essentially, as overburdened case processors, constrained by bureaucracy and surveillance.

This erosion of detective identity has deep roots. It is 17 years since Chatterton's (2008) study, was commissioned by the Police Federation. He argued that managerial reforms, budget cuts, and performance-driven policing already had begun to dismantle the autonomy, discretion, and investigative ethos associated historically with the CID. He warned that standardisation, de-skilling, and bureaucratic targets (all key elements in the PIP) were displacing the craft of investigation and alienating officers from the core purpose of their role. This paper argues that those dynamics not only have persisted but intensified, with new burdens, such as digital overload and accreditation demands, compounding the challenges identified by Chatterton. The shift from prestige to pressure represents a profound cultural transformation, exacerbated by generational turnover and institutional neglect of experiential learning. Where once detectives were seen as elite problem-solvers operating with discretion and authority, today's practitioners often feel reduced to the role of case processors, constrained by procedure and surveillance.

Newer officers spoke of CID only as a stepping stone to more fulfilling detective roles or promotion; somewhere they would stay for the minimum time possible before they would leave for a less pressured role. Some experienced detectives described a growing sense of disillusionment or emotional detachment. These accounts echo the findings of Padilla *et al.* (2023), whose work on burnout in U.S. detectives highlighted the combined toll of overwork, undervaluation, and high-stakes responsibility. The culture of emotional stoicism, revealed by this study, combined with a lack of institutional response, risks not only the health of individual officers but the sustainability of investigative teams more broadly.

Comparative insights and structural constraints

Cross – force and international parallels show that the strains on detectives are not unique to England and Wales, but their impact is amplified by the UK's fragmented policing system, which hinders consistent reform. While each force presents unique challenges, cross – force comparisons revealed striking commonalities. This section highlights these shared patterns and considers how structural factors – particularly funding, size, and governance – shape investigative practice nationally.

Internationally, the challenges faced by UK detectives mirror those reported elsewhere. In the Netherlands, Kelder (2021) identified high levels of investigative attrition due to burnout and workload overload; in Norway, Rostad and Langvik (2025) observed rising caseloads, weakened supervision, and mental strain; and in Australasia, Westera *et al.* (2016) documented how digital overload reshaped detective work and diminished confidence in investigative outcomes. Like the present study, these accounts point to a broader recalibration in investigative labour: a shift from depth to volume, and from professional discretion to compliance oversight.

The UK's challenges may be more acute because of the fragmented nature of its policing system. Unlike more centralised structures in, for example, Norway or the Netherlands, England and Wales have 43 separate forces, each with different funding allocations, digital capabilities, workforce planning practices, and leadership cultures. This decentralisation complicates workforce stability and reform, creating inconsistencies in how detective work is resourced, valued, and delivered. Limited budgets in some forces, combined with local governance priorities, exacerbate disparities in training, supervision, and digital infrastructure, leaving detectives unevenly equipped to meet rising investigative demand.

Taken together, the findings suggest that investigative policing is approaching a critical threshold. This final thematic section reflects on the cumulative impact of workforce strain, reform fatigue, and cultural disaffection, and sets the stage for the discussion that follows. Without a coordinated shift in how the role is supported, recognised, and resourced, the institution risks losing not only experienced officers, but also the core practices and professional identities that underpin effective investigations. As Stelfox (2012) observed, investigations are complex social practices shaped by context as much as doctrine. If the organisational context becomes untenable –

through unchecked demand, digital burden, emotional toll, and institutional detachment – even the most capable investigators will struggle to deliver justice.

This paper has shown that investigative policing in England and Wales is operating under compounding and often conflicting pressures. Detectives are tasked with managing complex, high – stakes cases amidst rising caseloads, expanding digital burdens, procedural rigidity, and inconsistent supervision. While recruitment initiatives such as the Police Uplift Programme (UK Parliament CoPA 2022) have improved numerical strength, they have not addressed the deeper issues of preparedness, resilience, and retention. The implications extend beyond workforce concerns. When investigative capacity is diminished, victims suffer, public trust erodes, and the justice system falters. Addressing these challenges will require more than managerial reform: it demands cultural renewal, strategic investment, and structural attention to funding, workforce size, and governance frameworks that currently constrain detective effectiveness.

It should be noted that our study did not include detectives in specialist units such as economic crime, organised crime, or counter – terrorism. These officers typically work with greater resourcing, enhanced equipment provision, and higher autonomy, and they are not required to complete PIP accreditation once in role. Their experiences may differ in important respects from those of frontline detectives. Our focus was deliberately on generalist investigative roles, where the pressures of caseload volume, PIP, and weakened supervision are most acute.

Our findings suggest that simply increasing headcount has not equated to greater capacity or capability. Many detectives, especially new entrants, are asked to manage complex and high – risk cases without sufficient experience, guidance, or protected learning time. Meanwhile, experienced officers are stretched thin across casework, informal supervision, and accreditation support, often with little institutional recognition or relief from operational duties. The formal professionalisation framework (PIP) undoubtedly has standardised procedures and strengthened accountability, but in practice its implementation has added burdens without providing the necessary structural or pastoral supports. The result is a workforce that, despite its skill and commitment, is suffering attrition and professional fatigue.

Conclusion: from understanding to reform

Our evidence shows that headcount alone is a poor proxy for investigative capacity: detectives repeatedly point to experience, team stability and manageable caseloads as the decisive ingredients of successful case work. A recent Home Office analysis of force-level charge data (2024) corroborates this qualitative picture, reporting that officer experience and low turnover, not sheer numbers, drive better outcomes, and that rising workloads suppress charge rates. Taken together, these two strands of evidence indicate that workforce strategy must pivot from numerical growth toward retention, supervision, and the cultivation of deep investigative expertise.

Our findings echo recent inspection evidence (HMCPSI and HMICFRS 2025), which similarly identified that overly bureaucratic systems, inadequate IT infrastructure, and cultural tensions between the police and CPS continue to undermine the effectiveness of case building. Together, they point to the urgent need for reforms that prioritise workforce stability, supportive supervision, and streamlined processes if investigative policing is to recover its effectiveness and credibility.

Policymakers should take particular note of our finding that detective work is no longer seen by many officers as a sustainable or attractive long-term career. A perceived loss of professional identity, combined with excessive bureaucracy and insufficient support, is contributing to declining morale and increasing staff turnover. The challenges those issues represent are not about individual performance; they are systemic and require a coordinated institutional response. Workforce planning must move beyond numerical targets and incorporate strategies for retention, wellbeing, and career progression. This means embedding structured mentoring, ensuring detectives caseloads are manageable, and creating career pathways that recognise and reward investigative expertise.

Our findings suggest that without meaningful investment in mentorship, supervision, and career progression pathways, detective capacity will continue to degrade. Organisational policy must shift from reactive, compliance-driven models to proactive support structures that acknowledge the complexity of investigative labour. At the policy level, reform should prioritise building investigative resilience through long-term investment in digital infrastructure, leadership development, and training that balances accreditation with the cultivation of tacit knowledge.

The limited uptake of the kind of transformative approaches envisaged by Eck and Rossmo (2019) illustrates the depth of the challenge. While incremental reforms may ease immediate pressures, our findings suggest that without more radical rethinking of investigative practice, policing risks remaining trapped in a cycle of crisis management. Addressing these issues will require not only investment and support, but also the institutional courage to embrace innovation that values both analytical evidence and practitioner expertise. Future research should examine not only the lived experiences of detectives, but also the organisational dynamics that enable or inhibit reform, with comparative studies across jurisdictions providing valuable lessons for the UK context.

Ultimately, this paper argues that improving investigative performance is not merely a question of recruitment or training but of rebuilding the conditions under which professional practice can thrive. That requires stable teams, trusted leadership, digital infrastructure, space for learning, and meaningful opportunities for detectives to grow and develop in the role. Reforms that ignore these relational and contextual dimensions will continue to meet resistance; not out of cynicism, but out of exhaustion. In that respect, the future of CID will depend not on abstract commitments to reform, but on a grounded re-engagement with what detectives need to succeed: time, trust, support, and a recognition that investigative expertise is not manufactured through metrics, but cultivated through mentorship, experience, and the space to think.

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Author contributions

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