# Detective Work in England & Wales in Comparative Perspective: a report for the National Police Chiefs Councils’ Recruitment, Retention and Wellbeing of Investigators Working Group

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## Executive summary

* We examined the experiences of detectives in England & Wales, drawing on 45 qualitative interviews across five police forces, alongside comparative material from 14 Finnish and 24 Danish detectives.
* Across all three jurisdictions, investigators described conditions of overload, digital evidence backlogs, and threats to wellbeing. Yet, the ways in which these pressures were mediated diverged sharply.
* In England & Wales, detectives carried excessive caseloads with little organisational protection, leaving resilience to individuals and informal peer solidarity.
* In Finland, detectives also faced overwhelming 'piles' of cases, but cultural resources of compassion and atmosphere provided collective resilience, making workloads more bearable.
* In Denmark, particularly in the National Special Crime Unit, detectives operated with formal organisational protections, including caseload caps, mandatory supervision, embedded psychological support. The National Police employ coordinators who ensure that responsibility for backlog and delay is absorbed institutionally rather than by individual investigators.
* Placed in comparative perspective, these findings highlight three distinct models of detective resilience: one centred on individual endurance, one grounded in occupational culture, and one institutionalised through organisational structures.
* The English & Welsh case demonstrates the risks of leaving resilience to individuals alone, while the Finnish and Danish experiences suggest alternative pathways for sustaining detective work under strain.

## 1. Introduction

Detective work long has been associated with professional skill and public legitimacy, combining the careful construction of cases with the pursuit of justice for victims. Yet across contemporary policing systems, detectives say their work increasingly is shaped by overload, bureaucracy, and resource constraints. This paper examines the case of England & Wales, based on 45 interviews with detectives across five police forces. It situates their experiences alongside 14 Finnish and 24 Danish detectives within a wider comparative study.

## 2. International Context

International research shows striking consistencies in the challenges faced by detectives today, while also highlighting national variations in organisational response. Comparative studies in Nordic countries (Fahsing & Ask, 2013; Rostad & Langvik, 2025) and continental Europe (Liljegren et al., 2021) emphasise the dual pressures of volume crime and digital evidence, often framed as the 'piling up' of unsolved cases. In North America, scholars note high workloads, disclosure demands, and retention difficulties, but also the role of local discretion in shaping how detectives manage caseloads (Liederbach et al., 2010; Padilla et al., 2023). Australasian studies (Westera et al., 2016) have focused on the future of the detective role, calling for enhanced professional development and recognition of investigative craft. Research from South Africa and Latin America (Khanyile, 2025) has drawn attention to how systemic resource constraints and mental health risks create conditions that echo, but also intensify, those observed in European and Anglo-American contexts.

At the same time, cross-national scholarship points to divergent cultural and institutional buffers. In some settings, professional identity and solidarity help investigators withstand strain (e.g. Padilla et al., 2023 on the US), while in others, formal organisational protections such as case caps or mandated supervision are more significant (Liljegren et al., 2021 on Sweden). The comparative literature thus provides a useful lens for understanding England & Wales, Finland, and Denmark not as isolated cases but as variations within a global pattern of detective work under pressure.

## 3. Methods

The study draws on 45 semi-structured interviews with detectives in five police forces in England & Wales, 14 interviews with Finnish detectives and 24 with Danish detectives. Face-to face interviews were conducted between September 2023 and September 2024. The research was reviewed and approved by the Liverpool John Moores University ethics committee (reference 24/LCP/009) and approved in advance by the National Police Chiefs Council of England and Wales, the National Police Board of Finland, and the Danish National Police. The research team received no funding from any of those bodies. In each case, interviews covered recruitment and retention, training, caseloads, wellbeing, leadership, generational change, collaboration, technology, job satisfaction, and ethics. Data were coded thematically. Findings for England & Wales first are presented here under 10 themes for comparability with the Finland and Denmark cases.

## 4. Findings

**(a) England & Wales**

*Recruitment & Retention -* Detectives repeatedly described investigative roles as unattractive to potential recruits, with few volunteers and many officers deterred by the pressures involved. As one explained, ‘Nobody wants to be a detective anymore. Why would they? The work is relentless, the pay is no different, and the pressure is massive’. Retention was fragile, with officers leaving the role after short periods or avoiding transfer altogether.

*Training & Development -* Training and accreditation requirements were viewed as excessive and demoralising. Several interviewees criticised the Professionalising Investigation Programme and the National Investigators’ Exam. One detective said, ‘The NIE is a nightmare. It’s box-ticking and has nothing to do with real investigation. It just puts people off’. A trainee detective said, ‘You spend more time worrying about the paperwork for accreditation than actually learning how to investigate.’

*Caseloads & Workload -* Detectives described workloads as overwhelming and unmanageable. One detective sergeant explained, ‘I have over a hundred live cases on my desk. There is no way I can properly investigate them all. I just have to pick and choose what I can do’. The constant need to triage was a recurring theme: You’re constantly firefighting. You never get ahead. You just try to stop drowning’ (trainee detective).

*Mental Health & Wellbeing -* Wellbeing risks were seen as severe, with stress and burnout reported widely. “I’ve had colleagues signed off with stress for months. People are just broken by the volume of work” (experienced detective). Another noted, ‘I take it home with me. You can’t just leave it at the office when you know victims are waiting and you can’t give them the service they deserve’ (detective sergeant). Formal wellbeing support was often described as tokenistic: They tell us there’s support available, but in reality, you’re on your own’ (trainee detective).

*Leadership & Management -* Leadership frequently was criticised as detached and target driven. ‘Senior managers don’t care about the craft of investigation. All they want is numbers – how many charges, how many files completed. That’s what matters to them’ (detective inspector). Another added, ‘You don’t get praise. You don’t get recognition. The only time you hear from above is when something goes wrong’ (experienced detective constable).

*Generational Change -* Detectives noted a shift in expectations among younger officers. ‘The new generation doesn’t want to be detectives. They want work–life balance, and they see what we go through and say, ‘no thanks’ (detective inspector). Others commented on generational gaps in resilience: ‘We were told to just get on with it. The younger ones push back more and, honestly, I don’t blame them’ (detective sergeant).

*Collaboration & Teamwork -* Despite organisational pressures, detectives emphasised the importance of teamwork. ‘The only reason we survive is because of each other. You share the load, you moan together, you pick each other up’ (trainee detective). Middle managers also played a vital role in buffering pressure: ‘My DS is brilliant. She shields us from the worst of the nonsense from above. Without that, I’d have left ages ago’ (trainee detective).

*Technology & Digital Evidence -* Digital evidence was a near-universal frustration. ‘Phones are the killer. Every suspect has three, and every victim has five. Each one takes weeks to examine, and the backlog is endless’ (trainee detective). IT systems also were widely criticised: ‘The systems are clunky, they crash all the time, and they don’t talk to each other. You waste hours every day just trying to get basic information’ (detective sergeant). Disclosure obligations added further weight: ‘The amount of digital material is insane. Phones, computers, social media – you could spend months on one case. But you can’t, because there are fifty more waiting’ (detective inspector).

*Job Satisfaction & Professional Identity -* Despite frustrations, detectives retained pride in their craft. ‘Being a detective is still the best job in policing. You actually solve things, you help people, you put bad guys away’ (experienced detective). But many felt this pride was undermined by organisational barriers. ‘I love the work, but the organisation makes it impossible to do it properly’ (experienced detective).

*Ethics, Risk & Legislation -* Detectives spoke of navigating a highly risk-averse legal environment, with disclosure requirements particularly burdensome. ‘Disclosure is a nightmare. You’re terrified of missing something, but the sheer volume makes it impossible” (experienced detective). Another said, ‘The law is so complex now that you spend more time worrying about procedure than about catching criminals’ (experienced detective).

## (b) Finland

Detectives in Finland consistently referred to overwhelming workloads, described by one as 'piles' of cases. Despite these pressures, detectives drew on cultural resources of compassion and atmosphere to sustain their work. Resilience was understood as a collective rather than an individualized process, with solidarity and maintaining a positive atmosphere seen as vital to making the workload bearable. The Finnish case demonstrates how occupational culture can provide resilience, even in the absence of structural protections such as caseload caps or mandated supervision.

## (c) Denmark

Detectives in Denmark, particularly in the National Special Crime Unit (NSK), described structural protections that buffered them from overload. These included caseload caps, mandatory supervisory oversight, and access to structured psychological support. Leadership was frequently described as protective, with managers assuming responsibility for investigative delays. More broadly, in the national police, the ‘coordinator’ role ensured that institutional responsibility was taken for case backlogs and delays, so that individual detectives did not carry personal blame. Although the strain of digital evidence also was acknowledged, the presence of these organisational protections shaped how Danish detectives experienced pressure, with resilience sustained through institutional design rather than individual coping alone.

## 5. Discussion

The findings underline the common pressures facing detectives internationally unmanageable caseloads, digital evidence burdens, and fragile wellbeing - while also revealing how different systems distribute responsibility for those pressures. In England & Wales, responsibility fell largely on individual investigators, producing a sense of isolation and corrosive strain. In Finland, detectives experienced similar overload but relied on occupational culture, emphasising compassion, teamwork, and atmosphere, as a means of endurance. In Denmark, structural mechanisms such as caseload caps, mandatory supervision, embedded psychological support, and the coordinator role institutionalised resilience by shifting responsibility for delay from the individual to the organisation.

These contrasts align with wider comparative literature. Nordic studies highlight how organisational design can shape resilience: Liljegren et al. (2021) describe Swedish detectives relying on workload management structures, while Rostad and Langvik (2025) show how Norwegian prosecutors’ stress derived less from exposure to disturbing material than from institutional workload. By contrast, US research points to occupational solidarity and coping strategies as key buffers in the absence of strong organisational protections (Padilla et al., 2023). Westera et al. (2016) emphasise the need to recognise and develop detective craft in Australia and New Zealand, echoing the cultural route to sustaining the role. Research in South Africa demonstrates the consequences of lacking both structural and cultural buffers, with investigators left acutely vulnerable (Khanyile, 2025).

Placed within this broader landscape, the three cases suggest a useful typology. England & Wales illustrates a model where detectives shoulder systemic pressures without meaningful institutional support. Finland highlights a cultural model, where shared ethos and team atmosphere help to contain strain. Denmark demonstrates a structural model, where the organisation assumes institutional responsibility for backlog and delay. The comparison underscores that detective identity remains resilient across contexts, but its sustainability depends on whether resilience is supported structurally, culturally, or left to individuals alone.

**6. Conclusion**

This study contributes to the global literature on investigative policing by identifying three models of detective resilience. In England & Wales, resilience was individualised and fragile, leaving detectives exposed to corrosive overload. In Finland, resilience was grounded in occupational culture, with solidarity and atmosphere providing collective buffers against unmanageable workloads. In Denmark, resilience was institutionalised through organisational design, including caseload caps, mandatory supervision, psychological support, and the coordinator role that ensured responsibility for backlog was carried by the institution.

The policy implications are clear. Sustaining detective work requires building either cultural or structural buffers into investigative practice. England & Wales demonstrates the risks of relying on individual endurance alone. Comparative lessons from Finland and Denmark show that resilience can be supported either by cultivating team culture or by embedding structural safeguards that transfer responsibility from individual detectives to the organisation. Without such reforms, the professional identity that continues to make detective work attractive risks erosion.

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