

Craft under strain: comparative perspectives on detective work in England and Wales, Finland, and Denmark

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Abstract

Detective work is under sustained strain, driven by rising caseloads, digitalisation, and intensified organisational scrutiny. While these pressures are understood as global, less is known about how they are experienced and managed in different institutional contexts. Drawing on qualitative interviews with eighty-three detectives in England and Wales, Finland, and Denmark, this article examines how responsibility for coping with investigative strain is organised and how this shapes detectives' experiences of their work. The analysis indicates detectives across all three jurisdictions face broadly similar pressures but the ways in which these pressures are absorbed and managed differ markedly. Rather than treating resilience as an individual attribute, the article conceptualises it as an organisational accomplishment shaped by culture, structure, and professional learning arrangements. Through comparative analysis, the article develops a framework for understanding how different policing systems mediate shared pressures, contributing to debates about investigative craft and the sustainability of detective work.

Introduction

Detective work has long been understood as a distinctive occupational craft within policing. It involves the practical reconstruction of events, the interpretation of often-fragmented evidence, and the exercise of judgement under conditions of uncertainty (Ericson 1981; Loftus 2012). This craft is rooted in tacit, experience-based knowledge acquired through practice rather than formal instruction alone. Its competent exercise depends on time, continuity, supervision, and discretion. However, in recent years the organisational conditions that sustain investigative practice have come under increasing strain.

Across many liberal democracies, criminal investigation is being reshaped by a combination of managerial reform, post-2010 austerity, and rapid technological change (Milloff 2023; Padilla et al. 2023; Khanyile 2025). In England and Wales, these pressures have become particularly visible (Police Federation 2024; HMICFRS 2025). Digitalisation has intensified investigative strain by vastly expanding evidential volume and disclosure obligations, displacing time from interpretive and victim-focused work and increasing cognitive and

moral load for investigators (Wall and Williams 2014; Hurn 2018; Wilson-Kovacs 2019; James et al. 2026). These burdens have been linked to weak communication and a decline in detection rates, contributing to victim dissatisfaction and attrition (HMICFRS 2024b, 2025; ONS 2024; Victims' Commissioner 2024). At the same time the detective role, once regarded as a desirable and elite career pathway in policing, has become less attractive as workloads intensify and the emotional and administrative burden of investigation increases (James et al. 2023, 2026). Managerial reform and austerity have compounded these effects by reducing experiential depth, constraining supervision, and redistributing responsibility for coping with strain on to individual detectives. Although formal rank structures largely have remained intact, demographic churn and role redesign have normalised excessive workloads and emotional endurance as occupational expectations rather than organisational problems (Salter 2019; HMICFRS 2024a; HMCPSI/HMICFRS 2025).

England and Wales provides an instructive anchor case through which to examine contemporary investigative strain. In contrast, Nordic policing systems operate within different institutional and cultural traditions, often characterised by

lower hierarchy, stronger collegial norms, and greater emphasis on trust and shared responsibility. While subject to similar pressures of digitalisation and administrative demand, these systems organise investigative work according to different institutional rationalities. Comparative research on how such differences shape detectives' experiences of strain, however, remains limited.

This article examines how detectives in England and Wales, Finland, and Denmark experience investigative strain and how their organisations allocate responsibility for coping with it. Drawing on qualitative interviews with eighty-three serving detectives across the three jurisdictions, the article asks: how do different policing systems organise and sustain resilience within detective work, and what are the consequences for investigative craft and sustainability? Rather than treating resilience as a personal attribute, the article approaches it as an organisational accomplishment shaped by institutional context, professional learning, and everyday working arrangements. The analysis that follows develops a comparative framework to explore how shared pressures are mediated differently across systems, and what this reveals about the future sustainability of detective work.

Global pressures and the changing craft of investigation

Over the past two decades, criminal investigation has been reshaped by a combination of organisational, technological, and cultural change. The traditional image of the detective as a skilled craft worker, combining intuition, persistence, and close engagement with victims, has been challenged by powerful structural and technological forces. Detectives now operate in environments of managerial oversight, digital complexity, and public scrutiny unprecedented in policing history. These pressures are shared widely, mediated by national culture, organisation, and the state's approach to welfare and accountability (Loftus 2012; Westera et al. 2016; Kelder 2021; Liljegren et al. 2021).

The changing craft of investigation

For much of the twentieth century, professional knowledge of detective craft was transmitted through apprenticeship and oral tradition. References to investigative craft in this article describe forms of situated practice rather than normative claims about ethical quality. Investigators learned by imitation and incremental mastery, developing what Ericson (1981) described as a practical logic of inquiry. The craft rested on tacit reasoning and both moral and instrumental satisfaction. From the 1990s onwards, however, the rise of managerialism and risk governance reframed that craft within the language of performance. Accreditation, assessment, and audit became the new vocabulary of professionalism (James and Mills 2012; James 2013).

In England and Wales, this movement reached full expression in the Professionalising Investigations Programme (PIP), which defined levels of investigative competence and formalised the route from trainee to senior investigator (McGrory and Treacy 2011; Stelfox 2012). Similar processes appeared

elsewhere. In Australia and New Zealand, standardised detective accreditation schemes mirrored PIP (Westera et al. 2016), while across Europe, police training increasingly has been shaped by shared competency frameworks promoted through the European Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL) and related EU initiatives (CEPOL 2025). The result has been an international convergence in spirit, if not in form, of police professionalisation.

Managerialism, austerity, and the erosion of autonomy

Managerial reform in policing sought to improve transparency and control public expenditure (Butterfield et al. 2004; Cockcroft and Beattie 2009). The cultural consequences for investigation have been profound. Detectives now work under numerical targets (case clear-up rates, timeliness indicators, disclosure deadlines) that prioritise throughput over inquiry (HMICFRS 2023; James et al. 2026). Austerity compounded this shift. Post-2010 cuts redistributed much of the crime-related work from patrol officers and some specialist posts to front-line investigators (James 2013; Salter 2019). Loftus (2012) argues that, moreover, managerial reforms and resource reductions effectively have hollowed out the middle ranks, leaving investigators operationally autonomous but unsupported strategically.

Research suggests that managerial logics have reshaped the moral economy of detective work, redefining success less in terms of investigative outcomes and more through administrative compliance (James et al. 2023). Detectives have described their role as one of 'case processing' rather than investigation, reflecting the growing weight of procedural and bureaucratic demands (James et al. 2025, 2026). Scholars argue that this emphasis on individual accountability, combined with chronic resource scarcity, has rendered the role both burdensome and psychologically precarious (Wilson-Kovacs 2019; James et al. 2023, 2025).

The digital turn

Technological change has reshaped every aspect of policing, but its effects are particularly acute in criminal investigation. Each smartphone, CCTV system, and social media platform now generates vast quantities of potential evidence. Wall and Williams (2014) describe this as a 'data deluge': information that overwhelms detectives' capacity to review, interpret, and contextualise material within reasonable timeframes. As Wilson-Kovacs (2019) observes, detectives increasingly find themselves waiting on machines; reliant on digital-forensic pipelines that themselves are constrained by demand.

Comparative research on how different policing systems organise and absorb the digital burden remains limited. Existing studies nonetheless suggest that while digitalisation offers benefits such as traceability and transparency, it has also recast investigative work by diverting time and attention away from interactional and analytical aspects of the role. In England and Wales, responsibility for managing digital evidence commonly falls on individual investigators alongside existing caseloads and administrative demands (Wilson-Kovacs 2019; James and Carr 2025; James et al.

2025, 2026). This concentration of digital labour at the front-line has been linked to investigative bottlenecks and to heightened moral and cognitive strain (Wilson-Kovacs 2019). How responsibility for digital evidence is organised, however, is not uniform. As the findings later show, differences in the distribution of digital work across jurisdictions shape how detectives experience investigative strain and their capacity to sustain interpretive work.

Organisational culture and welfare

Research suggests that organisational culture acts as a critical filter through which occupational stress is experienced (Liederbach et al. 2011; Wilson-Kovacs 2019; Liljegren et al. 2021). In North American policing contexts, where investigative work often is described as individualised and adversarial, studies report high levels of burnout, cynicism, and emotional withdrawal among detectives (Liederbach et al. 2011). By contrast, research from parts of the Nordic region highlights the potential buffering effects of collegial, egalitarian workplace norms and lower hierarchical distance (Liljegren et al. 2021). In relation to Finland, existing studies tend to address culture at a general level, offering limited insight into how such norms are enacted in everyday policing or how they shape officers' experiences of strain (Kääriäinen 2008; Eliasson 2023; Ranta 2025). These questions are taken up empirically in the analysis that follows.

Denmark provides an example of organisational design that translates cultural values into structure. The creation of the National Special Crime Unit (NSK) in 2022 integrated intelligence, forensics, and investigation under a single management system (Lindergaard-Bentzen 2025). This reform sought to prevent duplication and to formalise workload management. Early assessments suggest improvements in coordination and wellbeing, illustrating how institutional design can transform resilience from a personal quality into a shared organisational function (Rostad and Langvik 2025).

A global pattern of craft under strain

Despite national differences, three global trends stand out from the literature. First, the standardisation of detective training has increased procedural consistency but eroded informal learning. Second, austerity and managerialism have shifted responsibility for coping downward, individualising resilience. Third, digitalisation has intensified the labour of investigation while redefining its skill base. Together, these forces have placed the detective craft under strain in both material and moral terms.

Yet variation persists in how investigative strain is understood and addressed across policing systems. In England and Wales, research suggests that resilience often is treated as a private responsibility, reliant on individual coping strategies (Ogden 2018; James et al. 2023). In contrast, studies from the Nordic region point to the potential buffering effects of collegial cultures and organisational trust, though their operation in everyday practice remains under-examined (Liljegren et al. 2021). Recent reforms in Denmark have been described as offering a more institutional response through the formalisation of workload management and coordination frameworks

(Lindergaard-Bentzen 2025; Rostad and Langvik 2025). Overall, the literature suggests that sustainability depends less on the level of demand than on how responsibility for coping is organised.

Methodology

The research employed a qualitative, comparative design based on data collected in semi-structured interviews across three national policing systems: England and Wales, Finland, and Denmark.

Research design

This study explored how detectives in different policing systems experience and manage investigative strain. Rather than measuring performance or organisational outputs, the research sought to understand detectives' lived experience. Their perceptions of workload, supervision, wellbeing, and professional identity. A comparative approach was chosen to illuminate how shared global pressures may manifest differently in contrasting institutional and cultural settings.

England and Wales served as the anchor case, representing a highly professionalised but resource-stretched investigative system. Finland and Denmark offer alternative models situated within Nordic welfare and managerial traditions: Finland characterised by collegial and egalitarian work cultures; Denmark by formal workload management and structural welfare mechanisms. Examining these contexts side by side allows for a grounded understanding of how resilience in detective work is organised, sustained, or eroded. The overarching research question guiding the study was: *How do different policing systems organise and sustain resilience within detective work, and what are the consequences for the craft and sustainability of investigation?*

Sampling and participants

A total of 83 detectives participated in the study: 45 from England and Wales; 14 from Finland; and 24 from Denmark. Participants were drawn from a range of ranks (detective constable to detective superintendent, or equivalent rank/grade, reflecting national differences in organisational structure) and investigative specialisms, including volume crime, serious crime, domestic and sexual abuse, homicide, cyber, and intelligence. Recruitment combined purposive sampling with snowball techniques via professional networks and institutional gatekeepers. Participants varied in length of service and gender; all were serving detectives at the time of interview, and males outnumbered females in the sample by a ratio of almost 2:1. To protect anonymity, identifying details such as force, district, or unit names are withheld. Quotes reproduced in the findings are verbatim, with ellipses (...) indicating omitted words for brevity. Quoted participants are identified by case of origin, role, and years of service (e.g. EW-DC-01 [trainee, 2y]; FI-INV-07 [supervisor, 15y]; DK-INV-12 [NSK, 10y]).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person in English between July 2023 and October 2024. Each lasted

between 45 and 90 minutes and followed a flexible guide covering: recruitment and training, workload, leadership, well-being, collaboration, digital evidence, and job satisfaction. This format allowed detectives to steer discussion towards the issues they felt most important. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and contextual fidelity. Cultural expressions central to meaning, such as the Finnish *hyvä ilmapiiri* (good atmosphere) and Danish *arbejdsglæde* (joy from work) were retained in their original form.

Data analysis

Data were analysed thematically. A preliminary coding framework drew on existing scholarship on investigative culture (Loftus 2012; Tong and O'Neill 2020; Wilson and Grammich 2024) and organisational resilience (Boin and van Eeten 2013). Codes included workload, supervision, wellbeing, professional identity, and coping strategies. During analysis, additional inductive themes emerged: digital fatigue; moral compromise; loss of pride; and humour as coping. Within-case coding was followed by cross-case comparison to identify both convergence and divergence across jurisdictions. Analytical memos documented evolving interpretations and reflexive observations. Thematic saturation was achieved when no new insights appeared within each national dataset.

Researcher reflexivity

All authors have extensive experience in policing, which informed access and interpretation. This insider position facilitated rapport (participants often felt confident discussing sensitive issues) but required ongoing reflexivity to avoid over-identification. Regular peer-debriefing sessions with others in the research team and collaborators in Finland and in Denmark, and double-coding of transcripts by another researcher, helped maintain analytic balance. Professional experience informed but did not dominate interpretation. Special attention was given to cultural translation: concepts such as resilience, stress, and craft carry distinct local meanings that were preserved rather than standardised.

Ethics

The research was approved by the XXXX ethics committee (reference XXXX) 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. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to each interview. Data were anonymised, encrypted, and stored in accordance with GDPR requirements. Quotations included in this article are reproduced verbatim, with minor redactions to remove identifying information. Given the sensitivity of occupational critique, findings are presented in aggregated form by jurisdiction rather than by force or region. The authors attest that they received no funding from any external source for this study.

Limitations

Given differences in language, institutional arrangements, and occupational cultures across England and Wales, Finland, and Denmark, the analysis does not assume direct equivalence between national cases. Interviews were interpreted in their respective contexts, with comparative insights generated through analytic abstraction rather than literal comparison of practices or meanings. The study prioritised depth over breadth. With 83 participants across three countries, the sample cannot claim statistical representativeness or capture all organisational variation. Instead, it aims for analytic rather than numerical generalisation, illuminating processes and meanings that may resonate beyond the sample. While self-selection may have favoured more reflective or critical participants, the inclusion of multiple ranks and roles and triangulation across three national contexts strengthen the credibility and transferability of the findings.

The following section presents the empirical findings, examining each national case in turn. England and Wales is treated as the anchor case, followed by Finland and Denmark, reflecting the study's comparative logic from individualised to cultural and structural forms of resilience.

Findings

Across the three jurisdictions, detectives described broadly similar pressures on investigative work. What differed was not the nature of these pressures, but how responsibility for coping with them was organised. These configurations provide the framework for the analysis that follows.

England and Wales—individualised resilience

Detectives in England and Wales portrayed investigative work as an exhausting exercise in endurance. Most respondents linked their difficulties to excessive caseloads, limited supervision, and the relentless growth of digital evidence. As EW-DS-11 [trainee 1 y] put it, 'You're constantly firefighting... there's never time to do a job properly.' Several spoke of the sense of isolation that results from thinning supervision: EW-DC-1 [detective, 6y] said, 'You're on your own half the time; there's no one to sanity-check decisions anymore.' EW-DC-06 [trainee 2y] said that the situation was exacerbated by a churn of temporary sergeants and inspectors so that there was 'no consistency in leadership'. EW-DC-9 said that the lack of experienced supervisors meant that 'people aren't learning from experienced people ... it's the blind leading the blind'. EW-DC-15 [detective, 5y] said that detectives were 'ground down. There is too much work for everybody'.

Many detectives said that the PIP had improved basic competence but at the cost of mentorship and practical learning. A newly promoted participant, EW-DS-4 [supervisor 4y] observed, 'I passed every course, but none of it prepared me for the volume of work or the stress.' Others lamented that formal accreditation rewarded procedural compliance rather than investigative judgment: EW-DC-09 [trainee, 2y] said, 'It's all about ticking the boxes, not finding the truth.' The emotional toll on detectives in this environment was clear. Detectives described exhaustion, cynicism, and a pervasive sense of futility.

EW-DC-14 [detective, 12y], in relative terms a veteran, remarked, 'Detectives are broken... we're muddling through.' Participant EW-DC-8 [detective, 7y] added, 'You don't have time to think anymore, just react.' Experienced veterans lamented what they saw as the demise of the CID. EW-DS-15 [detective, 15y] said, 'It used to mean something to be a detective; now it's just more pressure for less pay.'

The issue of digital evidence featured in almost every research interview. Detectives spoke of days lost to downloading, viewing, and cataloguing material: EW-DC-8 [detective, 8y] said, 'I spend more time trawling through downloads and CCTV than talking to victims.' The curiosity and interaction that once defined investigation has been displaced by administrative labour. The backlog of digital analysis was perceived as the single greatest obstacle to the delivery of timely justice (EW-DS-4; EW-DC-14; and EW-DC-20 [trainee, 2y]). Wellbeing support was described as inconsistent and reactive; officers often relied on informal humour and peer camaraderie to survive emotionally taxing cases (EW-DS-4; EW-DC-14; EW-DI-22 [supervisor, 10y]). Participant EW-DC-2 ([trainee, 1y] said, 'You joke about the worst things, because if you didn't, you'd cry.' These narratives reveal what the authors term 'individualised resilience': survival achieved through personal endurance rather than organisational protection. Detectives repeatedly framed coping as a private responsibility. As Participant EW-DC-7 [detective 3y] summarised it, 'You just get on with it. No one's coming to save you.' The cumulative effect is a workforce that in many places functions despite, not because of, the system.

Finland—cultural resilience

Finnish detectives described facing pressures comparable to those reported elsewhere, including heavy workloads, complex evidence, and emotional strain. At the same time, they emphasised the importance of a cohesive working atmosphere and the maintenance of *hyvä ilmapiiri* within their units. Accounts frequently centred on mutual trust, shared responsibility, and everyday practices of support. Interviewees acknowledged that digital material had increased substantially in volume and complexity, but typically they did not describe responsibility for managing it as resting solely with individual investigators (F-INV-6 [investigator, 4y]; F-INV-9 [investigator, 7y]). Instead, digital tasks were discussed as shared within teams, supported through informal collaboration and routine access to specialist assistance when required (F-INV-6 [investigator, 4y]; F-INV-9 [investigator, 7y]; F-INV-10 [investigator, 3y]). Several detectives described these arrangements as helping them maintain time for interpretive work and engagement with victims.

Detectives also described a workplace culture in which supervisors were accessible and hierarchies relatively flat. Many valued being treated as professionals whose judgement was trusted. As F-INV-2 [investigator, 10y] put it, 'My boss doesn't need to check everything; he knows I'll tell him if there's a problem.' Interviewees commonly spoke of discussing difficult cases informally, including experiences of emotional fatigue, without fear of stigma. 'We talk about difficult cases at coffee. Everyone understands,' said F-INV-2

[investigator, 4y]. Humour featured prominently in these accounts as a shared coping practice. F-INV-1 [supervisor, 12y] commented, 'If we can laugh together, the day is not wasted.' Several detectives described a strong sense of belonging within their teams. F-INV-12 [senior detective, 20 + y] reflected, 'You have to care about your colleagues; otherwise, this job eats you.'

Alongside these accounts, interviewees expressed concerns about generational change. Some more experienced detectives felt that younger recruits were more rule-bound and less invested in collective identity. F-INV-1 observed, 'The new ones come from university; they think more about work-life balance.' While this was not necessarily viewed negatively, participants worried that it might affect team cohesion over time. As F-INV-10 [supervisor, 13y] noted, 'Atmosphere doesn't appear by itself. You must build it every day,' describing how teams, such as those working on child sexual abuse investigations, shared breakfast at the start of the working day (F-INV-2).

Finnish detectives also emphasised that investigative competence was learned primarily through experience rather than formal qualification. 'You learn by doing; being in the cases and watching how others work,' said F-INV-2. F-INV-8 [investigator, 9y] added, 'We don't have exams ... your skill shows in the quality of your cases.' Newcomers were described as being gradually absorbed into teams and guided by more experienced colleagues. Supervisor F-INV-10 referred to this as 'learning the rhythm of the job' rather than mastering a syllabus.

Denmark—structural resilience

Detectives in Denmark described a working environment that was highly structured, shaped by the relationship between the National Special Crime Unit (NSK) and the National Police (*Rigspolitiet*). Interviewees described the two bodies as performing complementary roles, with the NSK leading on serious and organised crime and the National Police providing policy coordination, resource allocation, and professional standards across Denmark's twelve police districts. A distinctive feature of the Danish system frequently highlighted by participants was the coordinator role. Coordinators were described as experienced investigators based within district structures who monitored caseloads and allocated work across teams. As D-INV-9 [investigator, 8y] explained, 'The coordinator keeps an eye on how many cases we have and what kind. If someone is overloaded, they move things around.' D-INV-11 [investigator, 12y] added, 'We don't have to shout when it's too much; the coordinator already knows from the system.' Coordinators were also described as acting as a point of organisational responsibility. As D-INV-16 [coordinator, 14y] put it, 'The coordinator carries the risk. If something goes wrong with a deadline or evidence, it's their responsibility to the organisation.'

Interviewees described the management of digital evidence as integrated into these organisational arrangements. Coordinators were reported to monitor not only caseload volume but also the digital demands associated with investigations, including disclosure and digital review requirements

(D-INV-9 [investigator, 4y]; D-INV-10 [investigator, 16y]). Where digital workloads increased, responsibility could be re-distributed through specialist support or case reallocation (D-INV-16). Several detectives described these arrangements as limiting the extent to which digital work accumulated unnoticed or fell to individual investigators alone (D-INV-6 [NSK investigator, 12y]; D-INV-14 [investigator, 5y]).

Detectives described regular contact with coordinators, including one-to-one meetings that addressed both case progress and personal wellbeing. D-INV-12 [investigator, 8y] explained, 'They ask how you are, not just how the case is going.' Participants described being able to make independent decisions about their investigations while remaining aware that workload and deadlines were being monitored at organisational level. As D-INV-11 noted, 'You can decide how to do your cases, but you're never left alone with the pressure.'

Professional learning was described as closely tied to experience rather than formal accreditation. Several detectives emphasised progression through case exposure and supervision. 'We learn by doing,' said D-INV-22 [senior investigator, 16y]. 'You start with simple cases and move to the hard ones when you're ready.' D-INV-9 added, 'There's no big exam or certificate. You show what you can do on the job.' Participants also described national case-management systems that allowed workloads to be visible across units. 'Everyone can see who has what,' said D-INV-16, 'so it's fair and we can move resources fast.'

Psychological and operational debriefings were described as routine rather than exceptional. As D-INV-9 put it, 'You don't have to ask for it. After a tough case, you talk with the psychologist. It's just routine.' D-INV-4 added, 'It's part of the job, like cleaning your gun.' Several detectives referred to *arbejdsglæde* when describing satisfaction with their work, framing it in collective rather than individual terms. As D-INV-2 [NSK investigator, 8y] explained, 'It's not about being happy all the time, it's about knowing your work matters and that you are not alone in it'.

While participants acknowledged that digital evidence and administrative work continued to place pressure on investigations (D-INV-1 [NSK supervisor, 10y]), many described the organisation as recognising these demands. 'We are busy, yes, but not abandoned,' said D-INV-5 [investigator, 7y]. D-INV-11 commented that the structure meant 'someone always has your back'.

Discussion

This study examined how detectives in three policing systems experience and manage investigative strain, and why these differences matter. Across England and Wales, Finland, and Denmark, detectives described broadly similar pressures associated with caseload growth, digital evidence, administrative demand, and emotional exposure. What differed was not the nature of these pressures, but how responsibility for coping with them was organised. The findings suggest that resilience in detective work is less a matter of individual endurance than of organisational design, professional learning arrangements, and the distribution of support and risk.

Configurations of resilience

The analysis identified three distinct configurations through which resilience is organised in detective work: individualised resilience in England and Wales, cultural resilience in Finland, and structural resilience in Denmark. These configurations are not attributes of individuals or simple reflections of national culture. Rather, they describe how policing systems allocate responsibility for coping with strain across individuals, teams, and organisational structures, shaping how detectives experience their work and sustain investigative capacity over time.

Individualised resilience in England and Wales

In England and Wales, resilience is configured primarily as an individual responsibility. Detectives described absorbing strain through personal endurance, informal coping strategies, and extended working hours. Humour, stoicism, and a sense of obligation to 'get on with it' commonly were reported, echoing what Reiner (2010) characterised as occupational fatalism. However, under contemporary conditions of austerity, digitalisation, and managerial control, this fatalism appears increasingly difficult to sustain. Responsibility for systemic overload is pushed downwards, positioning frontline detectives as the primary shock absorbers of organisational failure. Professional learning and accountability are formalised, but the burden of coping largely remains individual and private.

Cultural resilience in Finland

In Finland, resilience is organised less through formal systems and more through everyday cultural practices. Detectives described a working environment characterised by mutual trust, low hierarchy, and shared responsibility both for cases and wellbeing. Practices such as open discussion of emotional strain, humour, and collective problem-solving routinely were described as part of maintaining *hyvä ilmapiiri*. Professional learning was closely tied to participation in practice and to belonging within teams. These arrangements do not remove investigative pressure, but they appear to shape how it is experienced, distributing strain across relationships rather than locating it within individuals alone.

Structural resilience in Denmark

The Danish case illustrates a different organisational response, in which responsibility for coping with strain is embedded structurally. Through the coordinator system and integrated case-management arrangements, workload, risk, and welfare are made visible organisational concerns rather than private burdens. Detectives described being able to exercise autonomy in investigative decision-making while knowing that capacity and deadlines were monitored at organisational level. Professional learning similarly was structured through staged exposure to cases and supervision rather than formal accreditation. Concepts such as *arbejdsglæde* were invoked to describe satisfaction derived from meaningful work within a supportive system, framing resilience as a collective and institutional accomplishment.

Professional learning, trust, and the moral economy of investigation

Across the three cases, differences in how resilience was organised were closely linked to contrasting conceptions of professionalism. In England and Wales, professionalism is articulated primarily through accreditation, assessment, and procedural assurance. In Finland and Denmark, it is more commonly framed in occupational and relational terms, grounded in trust, shared responsibility, and demonstrated capability within the community of practice. These differences are not about the presence or absence of standards, but about how standards are enacted and supported. The findings suggest managerial accountability and professional trust are not inherently opposed. Rather, their relationship depends on whether management systems amplify professional judgement or substitute for it.

Detectives' accounts highlight trust both as a moral and operational resource. Internally, trust shaped how discretion was exercised, how risk was managed, and how professional confidence developed. In England and Wales, detectives frequently described a deficit of trust across organisational levels, contributing to defensiveness and moral tension. In Finland and Denmark, trust was described either as relationally sustained or structurally embedded; supporting openness about strain and continuity of practice. While this study does not measure investigative outcomes or public confidence directly, it shows how detectives themselves understand the relationship between organisational trust and investigative quality. From this perspective, the internal moral economy of detective work forms an important backdrop to how legitimacy is experienced and enacted.

Comparative implications

Considered together, the findings suggest that investigative sustainability depends less on the absolute level of demand than on how responsibility for coping is organised. The Nordic cases demonstrate that resilience need not rely on stoicism or individual sacrifice but can be supported through cultural practices or structural design that distribute risk and preserve professional learning. The England and Wales case illustrates the limits of a system in which resilience largely is a matter for individuals and professional identity increasingly mediated through procedural compliance. These contrasts do not point to models for direct policy transfer, but they do highlight the importance of organisational arrangements that treat coping with strain as a shared responsibility rather than an individual failing.

Conclusion

This article has offered a comparative account of how investigative strain is experienced and managed within contemporary detective work, and why these differences matter. By identifying three configurations through which resilience is organised (individualised, cultural, and structural) it moves beyond accounts that locate resilience primarily in individual officers and instead highlights the role of organisational arrangements in sustaining investigative capacity under

pressure. The central insight is that resilience is not simply a matter of personal endurance or professional commitment, but of how policing systems allocate responsibility for coping with workload, risk, and emotional strain.

Across the three cases, detectives faced broadly similar pressures associated with caseload growth, digital evidence, and administrative demand. What varied was not the presence of these pressures, but whether they were absorbed privately by individuals, shared informally through occupational culture, or redistributed formally through organisational design. These differences shaped how detectives understood their work, how they learned, and how far they felt able to sustain confidence and judgement over time.

The findings also reframe debates about professionalisation in investigative policing. In England and Wales, professionalisation has been pursued primarily through accreditation, assessment, and procedural assurance. In Finland and Denmark, professionalism remains more closely tied to practice, trust, and situated learning. This is not a question of whether standards matter, but of how professionalism is enacted. Strategies that prioritise compliance without protecting time, supervision, and experiential learning risk limiting the very capacities they seek to secure.

Importantly, the analysis shows that managerial accountability and professional trust are not mutually exclusive. The Danish case illustrates how structural mechanisms can make workload, welfare, and risk visible organisational responsibilities rather than private burdens, without undermining investigative autonomy. This challenges assumptions that support and oversight necessarily constrain professional judgement, and points instead to the possibility of managerial systems that enable, rather than substitute for, investigative craft. The implications of these findings extend beyond the cases examined here. They suggest that efforts to rebuild investigative capacity should focus less on exhorting individual resilience and more on designing organisational conditions that make resilience sustainable. Where coping is left to the individual, fatigue and moral strain are normalised; where responsibility is shared, detectives report greater capacity to think clearly, learn effectively, and maintain professional confidence. These are not simply matters of wellbeing, but of investigative quality and institutional legitimacy.

This study does not establish causal relationships between resilience, performance, and public trust, nor does it offer a template for direct policy transfer. Rather, it provides empirically grounded insights into how different policing systems organise the conditions of investigative work under shared pressures. By foregrounding detectives' lived experiences, it invites a reorientation of debate from how to make detectives more resilient, to how organisations can be structured in ways that do not require the kind of 'heroic' endurance that has become characteristic of the investigative milieu in England and Wales.

For policing policymakers and leaders, the findings underline the limits of reforms that rely on individual resilience, training, or procedural compliance alone. Efforts to strengthen investigative capacity are likely to be more effective when they address how workload, risk, and welfare are distributed and managed across organisations. Structural mechanisms

that protect supervision, preserve experiential learning, and make capacity a shared responsibility, emerge as critical but often overlooked components of investigative governance. Without attention to these organisational foundations, further reform risks reproducing the very strains it seeks to resolve.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest in relation to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Data availability

The qualitative interview data underpinning this study are not publicly available because participants were guaranteed confidentiality and the data contain information that could compromise participant anonymity. Further information is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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