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Perspectives on police voluntary resignations

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ABSTRACT

This article explores voluntary police resignations through the broader lens of workforce expectations and the need for a more sustainable approach to policing careers. It begins with a review of the literature on police resignation and retention, followed by an overview of recent findings on why individuals choose to join the police, and an analysis of Freedom of Information Act (2024) data on voluntary resignations. These findings are then examined in relation to wider workforce research to consider the implications of rising resignation rates. The article concludes with recommendations for further research and practical strategies to support leadership, well being and a sustainable model of policing in the years to come.

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Police resignations; police retention; policing culture; police attrition

Introduction

Recent Home Office statistics (Home Office 2025) highlight a sharp rise in voluntary resignations from UK police forces, with departures now surpassing retirements for the first time in the modern era. Between 2022/23 and 2023/24, the voluntary resignation rate increased by over six per cent and the National Police Chiefs' Council (2023) reports that early career officers, particularly those with fewer than five years' service, now account for the majority of leavers.

This trend carries profound implications for policing. Resignations incur substantial financial costs, with the College of Policing (2024) estimating that replacing a single officer can cost more than £100,000, including training, equipment, and mentoring time. Knowledge loss is equally significant as the departure of experienced officers erodes organisational memory and undermines mentoring networks that are essential for the development of recruits (Charman and Bennett 2022, Wilson *et al.* 2023). These exits also accelerate an identified demographic shift within the workforce, thinning mid-career ranks and leaving an imbalance between inexperienced recruits and a small cohort of senior leaders. They raise structural, ethical and cultural questions about whether policing organisations are doing enough to create supportive environments that sustain long-term careers (Hilal and Litsey 2020).

These developments are not occurring in isolation. Similar trends are evident in other public service professions, including healthcare and teaching, where research indicates that employees are staying in posts for shorter periods and changing careers more frequently (Worth and Van den Brande 2020). Analysis by the OECD (2023) confirms that across advanced economies, the long-standing expectation of a job for life has been steadily replaced by more flexible and fluid career patterns, reshaping how people view employment stability and progression. Studies of generational work values suggest that younger cohorts increasingly prioritise flexibility, clear career pathways, and support for well-being, while placing less emphasis on traditional markers of loyalty to a single employer (Twenge *et al.* 2010). Policing is not immune to these wider workforce

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shifts and, significantly, faces additional pressures such as exposure to trauma, high public scrutiny, and unsocial hours, all of which can intensify the factors driving voluntary resignation (Galanis Fragkou and Katsoulas 2021).

These trends indicate a significant shift in the motivations of individuals pursuing careers in policing within the UK. Historically, many joined the police force in England and Wales with the vision of a lifelong career, driven by a strong commitment to public service and community safety and the guarantee of a pension 'more valuable' than most private pensions (Hutton 2011). This ethos was deeply embedded in the culture of policing, with officers often viewing their roles as a long-term vocation dedicated to serving and protecting the public. However, recent trends indicate a significant shift in these motivations, with figures indicating 72% of officers leaving in the first five years service (Gov. UK 2024). Contemporary studies suggest that while the desire to serve the community remains a foundational motivator, there is a growing emphasis among new recruits on career progression, job security, and work-life balance. Research by Cox *et al.* (2025a) found many new recruits still envisage a long-term career in policing, but with increasingly diverse expectations and motivations. Moreover, factors such as declining pay (in real terms), inadequate leadership (College of Policing 2015) and limited career progression opportunities have led some officers to perceive policing as a stepping stone to other career paths. For instance, a report by Dorset Police Federation (2023) highlights that officers pay has fallen by almost 17% in real terms since 2010, and a third of officers have fewer than five years' experience, with many leaving for the private sector.

While workload and operational stress are consistently identified as some of the drivers of police attrition, leadership quality represents an important organisational determinant of retention. Recent evidence from HMICFRS, the College of Policing and Police Federation wellbeing surveys suggests that officers who perceive senior leaders as unsupportive, ineffective or lacking procedural fairness report lower organisational commitment and higher intentions to leave. A study by Hesketh and Stubbs (2025) highlights that new recruits often idealise senior leadership roles, viewing them as pivotal in shaping the direction and ethos of the force. However, as officers progress in their careers, their perceptions can shift. Research by Davis (2017) suggests that mid-career officers may develop a more nuanced understanding of leadership, recognising the complexities and challenges faced by senior leaders.

Extending the earlier study by Cox *et al.* (2025b) the team conducted a follow-up with new (first year) and current (second and third year students) to explore the factors shaping their decisions to pursue a policing career. The study gathered data on a range of motivational and perceptual variables. Specifically, the study aimed to explore students' motivations for entering policing, including their career aspirations, perceived opportunities for progression, and vocational drivers such as helping others or job security. In addition, the research examined how students' perceptions of leadership at different ranks, from peers and first-line supervisors to senior officers, shaped their understanding of policing and their career expectations. By comparing new and current students across these measures, the study aimed to identify which motivations and perceptions remain stable during the training programme and which evolve as students gain experience and a clearer understanding of the profession.

Methods

Participants

A total of 196 students enrolled on the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA) programme at two UK universities, during the 2024/25 academic year participated. The sample comprised both new (first year) and current (second and third year) students, with no exclusion criteria.

Measures

Data were collected using an online survey administered via QuestionPro. The survey comprised 51 items covering nine areas: motivations for joining the police, career aspirations, trust and confidence,

expectations, challenges and support, diversity and inclusion, concerns about policing, organisational culture, and leadership (note that not all of the data is reported here).

Questions employed a mixture of response formats. Some items require multiple-choice responses (*e.g. 'Do you see policing as a lifelong career?' with options such as: 'Yes, more than 10 years'; 'No, less than 10 years'; 'Stepping stone to other careers'; 'Undecided'*), while others used scale ratings. For example, participants rated the extent to which different factors motivated their decision to join policing on an 11-point scale (*0 = did not motivate me to 10 = greatly motivated me*). Items were drawn from previously published research (Cox *et al.* 2025a) and newly developed questions specific to the aims of this study. The survey was designed to take approximately 15 min to complete.

Procedure

The study was introduced to students during scheduled classes, with access provided via a link on the programmes' Canvas pages. This link directed participants to a Participant Information Sheet (PIS), which explained the purpose of the research, what participation involved, confidentiality and anonymity arrangements, and researcher contact details. After reading this information, students provided electronic consent before beginning the survey. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were able to skip any questions they did not wish to answer. Completed responses were submitted directly through QuestionPro.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted (24/LCP/027). Participation was voluntary, and implied consent was obtained electronically prior to accessing the survey. Students were reminded that they could withdraw at any point during survey completion; however, as responses were anonymous, withdrawal was not possible once the survey had been submitted. No identifying information was collected, and all data were stored securely in accordance with LJMU research governance requirements and UK data-protection legislation.

Data analysis

Survey data were exported from QuestionPro and analysed using standard statistical procedures. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and means with standard deviations) were used to summarise responses. Where group comparisons were appropriate, inferential tests such as independent samples t-tests or chi-square tests were conducted. Prior to parametric testing, data were assessed for normality using Kolmogorov Smirnov tests. Where data deviated from normality, equivalent non-parametric alternatives were employed. All analyses were conducted at the conventional alpha level of .05.

Results

Demographics

The demographic profile of participants is presented in Table 1. On average, new students were younger ($M = 23.31$ years, $SD = 4.72$) than current students ($M = 26.29$ years, $SD = 7.06$). Both groups showed a relatively balanced gender distribution, with slightly more females than males among new students, and more males among current students. In terms of previous experience working within the police service, including Police Community Support Officers and other policing roles, the majority of students in both groups reported fewer than five years of experience, with only a small minority reporting 5-10 years or more than 10 years. These figures reflect a predominantly early-career cohort, with some variation in age and prior experience across groups.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of new and current policing students.

			n			Experience (yrs)		
Group	Mean (SD)	Range	Male	Female	n/a	<5	5–10	>10
New	23.31 (4.72)	18–37	47	54	0	78	3	1
Current	26.29 (7.06)	19–52	54	39	2	74	5	0

Motivations for joining

As shown in Table 2, helping people and being excited by the work were consistently rated as the strongest motivators across both new and current students, with no significant differences between cohorts. Similarly, the desire to fight crime and the appeal of job security were moderately strong and stable across groups. These findings suggest that certain vocational drivers, particularly service to others and enthusiasm for the role, remain high regardless of where individuals are in their policing career.

In contrast, several motivations did vary significantly between groups, highlighting areas where expectations and priorities appear to shift with experience. New students placed greater importance on the variety of roles ($t(194) = 2.05$, $p < .05$), opportunities for advancement ($t(189) = 4.99$, $p < .001$), and pay ($t(192) = 4.28$, $p < .001$) compared with current students. They also rated friendship ($t(183) = 2.20$, $p < .05$) and the prestige of the profession ($t(180) = 2.48$, $p < .05$) more highly, reflecting a stronger initial idealism. These differences suggest that as students progress, their motivations become more tempered, with a reduced emphasis on status, progression, and financial reward, and a greater focus on the practical realities of the role.

Career aspirations

As shown in Table 3, of the 197 students in the sample, 190 (96.4%) responded to the question regarding whether they viewed policing as a lifelong career, comprising 99 new students (97.1%

Table 2. Motivations for joining the police, across both New (1st Year) and Current (2nd and 3rd Year) students.

On a scale of 1-10, how much did each of the following, motivate you to join the Police Force?				
		Mean	SD	Sig
Opportunity to Help People	New	8.65	1.74	>.05
	Current	8.35	1.91	
Excited by the work	New	8.39	1.78	>.05
	Current	8.28	1.88	
Fight crime	New	7.85	1.78	>.05
	Current	7.86	2.15	
Job security	New	7.43	2.38	>.05
	Current	7.30	2.47	
Variety of Roles	New	8.78	1.53	<.05
	Current	8.24	2.13	
Job Pays Well	New	6.13	2.33	<.001
	Current	4.52	2.89	
Friends/Family in Police	New	3.34	3.59	>.05
	Current	3.62	3.85	
Power & Authority	New	2.73	2.54	>.05
	Current	2.58	2.52	
Good on CV for future jobs	New	2.96	2.72	>.05
	Current	3.45	3.16	
Friendship	New	5.41	3.10	<.05
	Current	4.40	3.19	
Profession has prestige	New	5.30	2.88	<.01
	Current	4.20	3.12	
Opportunity to advance	New	8.48	1.88	<.001
	Current	6.68	3.02	

Table 3. Presents the number of new and current PCDA students who view policing as a lifelong career (>10 years), as a shorter-term career (<10 years), or are undecided.

		>10	<10	Undecided	Sig
Do you see Policing as a lifelong career?	New	87	3	9	.329
	Current	72	4	14	

of the new student group) and 91 current students (95.8% of the current student group). Whilst there was no statistically significant difference between student group and viewing policing as a lifelong career, $\chi^2(2) = 2.22$, $p = .329$, new students showed a stronger inclination toward long-term commitment. Specifically, 87 (87.9%) new students indicated that they viewed policing as a lifelong vocation, compared with 72 (79.1%) current students, while 9 (9.1%) new students and 14 (15.4%) current students were undecided. These results suggest that, although the difference was not statistically significant, new students may begin the programme with a stronger initial commitment to a policing career.

New students rated the potential for promotion as significantly more important in their decision to join policing than current students (Table 4), M = 6.54, SD = 2.51, compared with M = 4.94, SD = 2.98, t(183) = 3.96, $p < .001$. This indicates that early in the programme, career progression is a key motivator, whereas current students may place less emphasis on promotion, potentially reflecting a more realistic understanding of career trajectories within the force.

In addition, new students also perceived opportunities for promotion within the police force as significantly clearer and more achievable than current students (Table 5), t(184) = 2.95, $p < .01$. These findings, alongside the previous results, suggest that perceptions of career progression and optimism regarding long-term opportunities may diminish as students gain experience, possibly reflecting increased awareness of organisational and operational realities.

Leadership

Based on a 1–10 scale where higher scores indicate greater perceived influence, As shown in Table 6, both groups rated peers and sergeants as moderately influential in shaping their perceptions of leadership, with no significant differences between cohorts. This suggests that more immediate levels of leadership continue to play a consistent role in forming students' expectations.

In contrast, perceptions of influence from higher-ranking officers declined significantly among current students compared to new students. Specifically, new students rated the influence of the Chief Inspector (t(134) = 3.39, $p < .001$), Superintendent (t(132) = 4.09, $p < .001$), Chief Superintendent (t(132) = 5.38, $p < .001$), Deputy Chief Constable (t(133) = 4.99, $p < .001$), and Chief Constable (t(131) = 5.01, $p < .001$) as significantly more influential than current students did.

This pattern indicates that new students placed greater importance on senior leadership in shaping their understanding of police leadership than current students. However, the current

Table 4. Shows mean ratings for the importance of career advancement as a motivating factor when joining the police. Independent samples t-tests indicate significant differences between new and current students.

		Mean	SD	Sig
On a scale of 1–10, how important is the potential for promotion in your decision to join policing?	New	6.54	2.51	<.001
	Current	4.94	2.98	

Table 5. Presents mean ratings and standard deviations for how clear and achievable students perceive promotion opportunities to be within the police force. Group comparisons are tested using independent samples t-tests, with significant differences noted.

		Mean	SD	Sig
On a scale of 1–10, do you feel the potential for promotion within the police force is clear and achievable?	New	6.98	2.09	<.01
	Current	6.01	2.39	

Table 6. Presents mean ratings for the perceived influence of peers and senior officers on students' perceptions of leadership, based on a 1–10 scale (higher scores indicate greater perceived influence). Independent samples t-tests highlight significant differences between new and current students for higher-ranking officers.

		Mean	SD	Sig
How much Influence on perception of what it is to be a leader				
Peers	New	4.45	1.01	$p > .05$
	Current	4.59	0.97	
Sergeant	New	5.12	0.95	$p > .05$
	Current	4.92	0.91	
Inspector	New	4.62	1.35	$p > .05$
	Current	4.44	1.80	
Chief Inspector	New	4.31	1.64	$p < .001$
	Current	3.34	1.69	
Superintendent	New	4.11	1.77	$p < .001$
	Current	2.85	1.80	
Chief Superintendent	New	4.25	1.73	$p < .001$
	Current	2.66	1.69	
Deputy Chief Constable	New	4.14	1.80	$p < .001$
	Current	2.65	1.67	
Chief Constable	New	4.71	1.54	$p < .001$
	Current	3.23	2.41	

survey does not provide evidence to explain why these perceptions differ between groups. Future research could examine whether this reflects changing perceptions of leadership as students progress through the programme, including the potential influence of increased exposure to policing practice, organisational structures, and different levels of police leadership.

To what extent are people leaving?

The student survey provides insight into motivations for joining policing, career aspirations, perceptions of career progression, and perceptions of police leadership among new and current students. However, as the survey captured students views and expectations at a particular point in their education, it cannot establish whether these factors subsequently contributed to an individuals decision to leave policing. In particular, the survey did not collect information from individuals who had resigned and therefore cannot determine whether voluntary resignation was associated with factors such as wellbeing, workload, trauma, pay, career progression, leadership, or working conditions. To examine the extent and timing of actual voluntary resignation, Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000, requests were therefore made to 46 police forces in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, including British Transport Police and City of London Police.

The requests sought voluntary resignation data for police officers and police staff in each force during 2024, broken down by length of service. Data was received from 44 of the 46 forces, although one dataset was subsequently excluded due to an identified inaccuracy in the figures provided. The following findings therefore represent an analysis of data from the remaining 43 requests relating to police officers, the populations of which vary from 252 in the smallest force to 33,293 in the largest.

In 2024 mean police officer resignations represented 3.76% of the total officer count within a force during 2024, ranging from 0.70% to 7.34%. With five of the 43 forces experiencing rates of voluntary resignations in excess of 6.0%. As contrasted with four forces experiencing rates less than 1.99% and only one force experiencing less than 1%. Within this data it was observed that all forces experience a spike in officer voluntary resignations within the first five years of service, though the magnitude and timing of this peak varies. For example, the rate of officers resigning with less than one year of service varied between 3.16% and 0.03%, with a mean average of 0.73% and a standard deviation of 0.53. In relation to officers voluntarily resigning with 1-2 years of service, this varied between 2.27% and 0.07%, with a mean average of 0.81% and standard deviation of 0.48.

With Officers with longer tenure, the rate resigning after 2-5 years of service varied between 2.53% and 0.26%, with a mean average of 0.88% and standard deviation of 0.43. Finally, amongst officers resigning with 5-10 years of service, the rate varied between 1.09% and 0.07%, with a mean average of 0.5% and reduced standard deviation of 0.24. Rates of voluntary resignation declined markedly after 10 years of service, though variation between forces continued.

In respect of police staff, data was analysed for 41 of the responding forces due to limitations on data availability. With similar trends emerging to those seen amongst the officer workforce, though with greater degrees of magnitude. For example, on average police staff resignations represented 8.50% of the total staff count within a force during 2024, ranging from 1.55% to 18.87%. Across the dataset, police staff populations ranged from 620 in the smallest force to 11,598 in the largest. As with police officers, police staff voluntary resignations tend to peak within the first five years of service. However, the magnitude and timing of this peak varies considerably between forces, and the increase in voluntary resignations is more pronounced among police staff than officers.

When broken down by length of service, the data demonstrate that the rate of police staff resignations within the first year of service varied between 0.10% and 3.81% (M = 1.94%, SD = 0.94). Similar rates were observed among staff with 1-2 years of service, where resignation rates ranged from 0.27% to 4.54% (M = 1.84%, SD = 0.98). Elevated resignation rates continued within the 2-5 years of service category, ranging from 0.51% to 4.00% (M = 2.02%, SD = 0.88), before declining in the 5-10 years of service category, where rates ranged from 0.11% to 2.88% (M = 1.26%, SD = 0.49). Rates of voluntary resignation declined markedly after 10 years of service, although variation between forces continued.

Taken together, these findings indicate that police staff attrition is concentrated within the earliest stages of employment, with elevated resignation rates persisting throughout the first five years of service before declining with increased tenure. This pattern broadly mirrors that observed among police officers, although the magnitude of attrition is generally greater among police staff. Whilst a broadly consistent early-career attrition pattern was evident across most forces, both the timing and magnitude of resignations varied considerably between organisations, and some forces experienced smaller secondary waves of attrition during the mid-career stages of service. These findings highlight the importance of further research into the organisational factors that may contribute to differences in attrition rates and retention outcomes across police forces.

However, these figures also require interpretation in light of wider trends in the UK workforce. For example, data from the CIPD suggests that the average turnover for UK workers was 34% in 2023, comprising 27.4% changing employer, and 6.6% leaving employment (CIPD 2024). Though the extent of attrition was also seen to vary by industry, with public administration and defence (incorporating policing) experiencing the lowest levels of attrition at 25% when compared to other sectors. Though within this figure 41.1% of resignations occurred amongst individuals with less than five years tenure. When compared to other industries it may therefore be inferred that the level of attrition in policing is not a significant concern, however such a proposition is arguably myopic. For example, the cost of training a police officer or specialist member of police staff is such that to maintain high levels of attrition is financially unsustainable over the mid- to long-term.

Further, policing is a profession in which mentoring is an important element in an officer's training, development and ultimately their ability to perform effectively in their role. Consequently, the loss of more experienced personnel leading to an increased proportion of new in-service officers leads to a situation in which forces may increasingly find themselves dealing with issues of sub-standard performance in addition to an absence of effective experienced mentors to support new entrants. Knowledge and experience are intangible but valuable assets which a force would be remiss to disregard. Finally, whilst policing currently experiences a lower rate of attrition than many professions, the rate of officer voluntary resignations has increased from 5895 in the year ending 31 March 2010 to a peak of 9192 in the year ending 31 March 2023. Which, though it declined

slightly in the year ending 31 March 2025 (8795) (Home Office 2025) still represents a substantial increase upon previous levels.

Against this backdrop, the following discussion seeks to move beyond surface explanations to interrogate the deeper motivations and meanings attached to officers' and staff's decisions to exit the profession.

Discussion

The present study provides two complementary perspectives on police workforce retention. The FOI analysis demonstrates that voluntary resignations are concentrated within the earlier stages of police careers, with the highest rates occurring within the first five years of service and a more pronounced pattern among police staff. The student survey provides additional insight into the expectations and perceptions held by individuals entering and progressing through police training. Although both new and current students identified 'helping people' and 'excitement about the work' as strong motivations for joining policing, significant differences emerged in relation to pay, career progression and perceptions of senior leadership. New students placed greater importance on pay and promotion, perceived promotion opportunities more positively, and were more likely to view policing as a lifelong career. Current students, by contrast, reported lower perceptions of the influence of senior leadership and less optimism regarding opportunities for advancement. Whilst these findings do not establish why individuals subsequently leave policing, they suggest that some expectations associated with joining the police service may change as individuals gain greater exposure to policing practice and organisational life. Given that voluntary resignations were concentrated during the earliest stages of service, understanding how such expectations evolve may be particularly important for future retention research and workforce planning.

The FOI data demonstrate when voluntary resignation is occurring and the extent to which this varies across police forces, but they do not identify the reasons for individual decisions to leave. Similarly, the student survey provides insight into motivations for joining policing, career aspirations and perceptions of leadership, but does not capture the experiences of individuals who have subsequently resigned. Consequently, the following discussion should not be interpreted as establishing causal explanations for the resignation patterns identified. Rather, the survey findings are considered alongside existing literature to explore how differences in expectations, perceptions and organisational experiences may help contextualise the attrition patterns observed in the FOI data and identify priorities for future research.

Organisational culture and leadership

One of the more notable findings from the student survey concerns perceptions of leadership. New students rated senior ranks, from Chief Inspector through to Chief Constable, as significantly more influential in shaping their perceptions of police leadership than current students. In contrast, perceptions of the influence of peers and sergeants did not differ significantly between groups. While the present study cannot explain why these differences occur, the findings suggest that perceptions of senior leadership may change as students progress through police education and gain greater exposure to organisational life.

The culture of policing has been a longstanding source of debate and concern. Officers who leave frequently describe a workplace that feels rule bound and process driven, where decisions appear to be imposed rather than shaped in partnership. This perception of being 'managed by paperwork' rather than supported as a professional is a consistent theme within studies of police resignation (Charman and Bennett 2022). Officers also report feeling unheard, with limited opportunities to provide feedback or influence operational policy, and this lack of employee voice can contribute to organisation injustice and disengagement. Wolfe and Lawson (2020) similarly argue that leadership quality is an important predictor of morale and turnover intentions, with weak supervision and

inconsistent guidance particularly problematic for early-career officers seeking support and mentorship.

When considered alongside the present findings, this literature raises the possibility that leadership may play an important role in shaping organisational commitment during the early stages of a policing career. However, the current study did not examine whether perceptions of leadership are associated with intentions to leave or actual resignation behaviour. Consequently, any relationship between leadership perceptions and voluntary resignation although widely evidenced in other sectors remains speculative and warrants further longitudinal investigation.

Workload, trauma and wellbeing

Although workload, trauma and wellbeing were not examined directly within the present survey, they remain prominent themes within the wider literature on police retention. Policing is a uniquely demanding occupation. Officers are required to manage long shifts, respond to unpredictable incidents and adapt to changing operational demands, often with limited opportunity for recovery between major events. Studies highlight how cancelled leave, excessive overtime and the expectation of continual availability can contribute to chronic fatigue and emotional strain (Galanis Fragkou and Katsoulas 2021). In addition to these operational pressures, police personnel may be repeatedly exposed to distressing, traumatic or violent incidents, which can have a cumulative psychological impact.

Evidence from Brunetto *et al.* (2012) suggests that burnout, work-related stress and reduced wellbeing are associated with lower organisational commitment and increased intentions to leave. Research has also highlighted continuing stigma surrounding mental health support within policing, which may discourage some officers from seeking assistance when experiencing psychological difficulties. Taken together, these findings suggest that workload, trauma and wellbeing may represent important considerations when seeking to understand police retention.

However, the present study did not collect data relating to wellbeing, operational stress, trauma exposure, or mental health. Consequently, it is not possible to determine whether these factors contributed to the attrition patterns identified in the FOI analysis. Future research should therefore explore whether the concentration of voluntary resignations during the early stages of policing careers is associated with experiences of workload, wellbeing and occupational stress.

Pay, conditions and career expectations

The present survey identified significant differences between new and current students in relation to pay, career progression and promotion opportunities. New students rated pay and opportunities for advancement as more important motivations for joining policing and were significantly more likely to perceive promotion opportunities as clear and achievable. Whilst the study cannot determine whether these perceptions subsequently influence decisions to remain in or leave policing, the findings suggest that expectations surrounding career development and organisational rewards may change as individuals progress through police education and early service.

These findings are particularly relevant when considered alongside wider debates surrounding pay, conditions and career expectations within policing. Although policing has historically been viewed as a vocation rather than simply a job, financial and structural conditions continue to influence how employees perceive the attractiveness and sustainability of a policing career. Pay freezes, pension reforms and changes to traditional employment benefits have altered perceptions of security and reward amongst some sections of the workforce (National Police Chiefs Council 2023). At the same time, research suggests that younger employees increasingly expect transparency regarding career progression, opportunities for personal development and a balance between professional and personal commitments (Twenge *et al.* 2010)

One interpretation of the present findings is that individuals may enter policing with relatively positive expectations regarding advancement and long-term career opportunities, but that these expectations become less optimistic as they gain greater exposure to organisational realities. Although the current study cannot establish why this occurs, nor whether it contributes to voluntary resignation, the pattern is noteworthy given that the FOI analysis identified the highest rates of attrition during the earliest stages of police careers. Future research should therefore examine whether changes in perceptions of pay, promotion opportunities and career prospects are associated with longer-term organisational commitment and retention.

Public scrutiny and job satisfaction

Public scrutiny and job satisfaction were not examined directly within the student survey and therefore cannot be linked empirically to the resignation patterns identified in the FOI analysis. Nevertheless, both have been highlighted within the wider literature as factors that may influence police retention. Over the last decade, policing has been subjected to intense media attention, high-profile scandals and increasing levels of public and regulatory scrutiny. Whilst accountability remains an essential component of democratic policing, some researchers have suggested that increased scrutiny may contribute to uncertainty and reduced job satisfaction amongst officers.

For example, Mourtgos Adams and Nix (2020) describe the emergence of 'defensive policing', whereby officers may become increasingly concerned with avoiding complaints, investigations or public criticism. Previous research suggests that such concerns can affect professional confidence, decision-making and perceptions of organisational support. In turn, lower levels of job satisfaction have been associated with reduced organisational commitment and greater intentions to leave employment.

However, the present study did not examine whether perceptions of public scrutiny, fear of complaints, or levels of job satisfaction differ between new and current students, nor whether these factors influence voluntary resignation. Consequently, their relationship to the attrition patterns identified in the FOI data remains unclear. Future research should explore the extent to which public scrutiny and job satisfaction influence retention decisions, particularly during the early stages of police careers where attrition appears to be most concentrated.

Structural and systemic influences

The increase in voluntary resignations mentioned earlier must be understood in the context of broader shifts within the labour market. The traditional expectation of a job for life has declined across most sectors, and mobility between careers is now seen as normal (OECD 2023). Public service roles, such as policing, are competing for talent in a workforce where loyalty is conditional on whether the organisation meets an individuals values, needs, and aspirations. Officers no longer automatically view policing as a lifetime career; instead, they evaluate it alongside other options, particularly if they feel their well-being or prospects are at risk. Forces that fail to respond to these wider changes risk losing skilled officers not only to private sector jobs but also to other public sector roles that are perceived to offer more flexibility or support.

Bringing these factors together

Taken together, the findings provide different but complementary perspectives on police attrition. The FOI analysis demonstrates a clear concentration of voluntary resignations during the earlier stages of policing careers, with the highest rates occurring within the first five years of service and a more pronounced pattern among police staff. The student survey provides additional context by identifying differences between new and current students in their perceptions of pay, career progression and senior leadership. Whilst motivations associated with helping people and excitement about the work remained relatively stable, current students reported less optimism

regarding promotion opportunities and attributed less influence to senior leadership than new students.

Although the present study cannot establish why individuals subsequently resign, the findings suggest that retention may be shaped by the interaction between initial expectations and later organisational experiences. When considered alongside the wider literature, areas such as leadership, organisational culture, career progression, wellbeing, job satisfaction and wider labour-market conditions emerge as plausible influences on long-term organisational commitment. However, the relative importance of these factors, and the manner in which they interact, remains unclear.

Importantly, the findings indicate that no single explanation is likely to account for the attrition patterns observed. Rather, police retention appears to be a multifaceted issue shaped by individual expectations, organisational practices and broader workforce trends. This suggests that retention strategies focused on a single factor, such as pay, wellbeing or promotion, are unlikely to be sufficient in isolation. Instead, a more holistic approach that considers leadership, organisational culture, wellbeing, career development and employee engagement may be required if policing organisations are to sustain commitment over the longer term.

Leadership & culture

One of the more notable findings from the student survey concerns perceptions of leadership. Whilst both new and current students perceived peers and sergeants as influential in shaping their understanding of leadership, current students attributed significantly less influence to senior leadership ranks than new students. Although the present study cannot explain why these differences occur, the finding suggests that perceptions of leadership may change as individuals progress through police education and gain greater exposure to organisational life.

Leadership has been identified as an important influence on employee commitment and retention across a range of organisational settings (Mahfouz 2019). Directly, leadership may affect commitment through the quality of engagement between leaders and employees, particularly where interactions foster trust and mutual respect. Indirectly, leadership contributes to the development of organisational culture through its influence on processes, practices, behaviours and decision-making. Consequently, several aspects of leadership appear particularly relevant to discussions of police retention, including the development of trusting leader-employee relationships, the promotion of employee autonomy and voice, and the adoption of authentic and service-oriented leadership approaches.

Self-Determination Theory suggests that organisational commitment and motivation are influenced by the extent to which three basic psychological needs are fulfilled: autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci Olafsen and Ryan 2017). Satisfaction of these needs has been associated with a range of positive outcomes, including enhanced wellbeing, performance and organisational commitment. Conversely, highly authoritarian or command-and-control leadership approaches may limit employee autonomy and reduce opportunities for learning, participation and professional growth.

Within policing, this presents a particular challenge. Contemporary police organisations operate within highly scrutinised and risk-sensitive environments, often encouraging close performance management and centralised decision-making. Whilst such approaches may be necessary in some operational contexts, they also have the potential to reduce employees perceptions of autonomy and influence over their work. Given the differences in perceptions of senior leadership observed within the present study, future research may benefit from examining whether experiences of autonomy and participation change as officers progress through the organisation.

Empowering employee autonomy may nevertheless feel risky for police leaders operating within a climate of high public scrutiny and organisational risk aversion (Loveday 2018). Policing has traditionally placed a premium on conformity, consistency and accountability (Reiner 2010), which

can make the delegation of discretion appear challenging. However, autonomy need not imply unrestricted decision-making. Rather, it may involve providing individuals and teams with greater opportunity to achieve agreed objectives through the application of their professional knowledge and expertise. From this perspective, retention may be supported not by removing oversight, but by critically evaluating those processes and practices that unnecessarily restrict employee discretion and involvement.

As observed in the present study, perceptions of leadership differed between new and current students. Whilst both groups viewed first-line leaders, such as peers and sergeants, as moderately influential in shaping their understanding of leadership, current students attributed significantly less influence to senior leadership ranks than new students. Although the present study cannot determine why these differences occur, the findings suggest that perceptions of senior leadership may change as individuals gain greater exposure to policing practice and organisational life.

Self-determination theory further emphasises the importance of relatedness in supporting motivation and organisational commitment (Deci Olafsen and Ryan 2017). In relation to leadership, the need for relatedness may be supported through the development of relationships characterised by trust, respect and reciprocity. Such relationships are more likely to emerge when leaders demonstrate competence, authenticity, humility, open communication and a visible commitment to the wellbeing of both individuals and the wider workforce (Owens and Hekman 2012). However, the development of these qualities may be influenced by aspects of police culture, including organisational hierarchies and the inter-rank suspicion identified within police occupational culture (Loftus 2010).

For example, in environments where promotion is highly competitive and career progression often requires movement between roles and the accumulation of evidence across a broad portfolio of activities, leaders may face competing demands between organisational expectations and relationship-building. Similarly, opportunities to establish trust may be constrained where engagement between leaders and employees is limited or inconsistent over time. Whilst the present study did not examine these processes directly, they provide potential explanations that may help contextualise the differing perceptions of senior leadership observed between new and current students. Further research is required to determine whether such factors influence organisational commitment or retention within policing.

Employee need fulfilment may be further supported through actions and practices that enhance employee voice and participation. Employee voice concerns an individual's ability to express concerns, ideas and perspectives, and for these contributions to be genuinely considered in organisational decision-making (Morrison 2014). In a policing context, this may include leaders seeking subject-matter expertise when making decisions, ensuring transparent human resource processes, enabling greater choice in areas such as postings and career development, consulting meaningfully with employees regarding organisational change, and providing feedback on issues, concerns or suggestions raised by the workforce.

The concept of employee voice may be particularly relevant when considered alongside the present finding that current students attributed less influence to senior leadership than new students. Although the study did not examine the reasons for this difference, perceptions of leadership influence may be shaped by the extent to which individuals feel heard, consulted and able to contribute to organisational decision-making.

However, the achievement of employee voice within hierarchical policing organisations may be constrained by reliance on the upward passage of information through successive rank structures (Mowbray Wilkinson and Tse 2015). Direct engagement between senior leaders and employees may also be limited by organisational size, operational demands and concerns regarding the potential consequences of 'speaking truth to power' within cultures that place a high value on conformity and compliance. Consequently, leaders seeking to strengthen organisational commitment may need to prioritise authentic engagement, active listening, trust-building and the creation of psychologically safe environments. This may also require critical reflection on decision-making processes and

the extent to which employees can meaningfully contribute to, and receive feedback on, organisational decisions (Wilkinson *et al.* 2020).

Whilst the present study cannot establish a direct relationship between employee voice and retention, the differences observed between new and current students suggest that future research should explore whether perceptions of voice, participation and engagement change during the early stages of a policing career, and whether such changes influence organisational commitment and retention.

Leadership approaches associated with higher levels of organisational commitment are generally those that promote employee engagement, participation and trust, in contrast to more traditionally authoritarian approaches that have historically influenced aspects of policing culture. Previous research has identified positive associations between organisational commitment and leadership approaches including servant leadership (Zhang *et al.* 2021), distributed leadership (Berkovich and Bogler 2021), and transformational leadership (Yahaya and Ebrahim 2016). Emerging evidence also suggests potential benefits associated with authentic, benevolent and ethical leadership, although further research is required to establish these relationships more firmly (Borde Arora and Kakoty 2024).

These perspectives are particularly relevant when considered alongside the present findings. Current students reported significantly lower perceived influence of senior leadership than new students, whilst perceptions of first-line leadership remained relatively consistent across groups. Although the study cannot determine why these differences occur, the findings may indicate that leadership experiences become increasingly important as individuals gain exposure to the realities of organisational life. In this context, leadership approaches that encourage participation, communication and engagement may play an important role in shaping organisational commitment during the early stages of a policing career.

Whilst the value of participatory and reflective leadership is widely recognised, it is also important to acknowledge that policing operates within a dynamic, uncertain and often high-risk environment. Situations will inevitably arise in which directive or command-and-control approaches are both appropriate and necessary. Consequently, rather than advocating a single leadership model, the present discussion supports the concept of ambidextrous police leadership: the ability to move flexibly between leadership approaches as circumstances require, whilst maintaining a commitment to trust, communication, employee engagement and critical reflection.

Taken together, the literature and present findings suggest that leadership and organisational culture may represent important influences on organisational commitment and retention. However, the current study cannot establish whether perceptions of leadership contribute directly to voluntary resignation. Future longitudinal research should therefore examine whether changes in perceptions of leadership occur alongside changes in organisational commitment and subsequent decisions to remain in or leave policing.

Wellbeing

Although wellbeing was not examined directly within the present survey, it remains one of the most frequently discussed issues within contemporary policing research. Over the last decade, a growing body of literature has highlighted concerns regarding police wellbeing, mental health and occupational stress (Brewin *et al.* 2022). Recent figures suggest that approximately 14,500 officers were signed off due to mental health-related sickness during 2023–2024, whilst the 2025 Oscar Kilo survey reported that over half of respondents had experienced physical exhaustion and fewer than four in ten felt their force provided adequate wellbeing support. These findings indicate that wellbeing continues to represent a significant challenge for policing organisations.

Existing research has also identified a potential relationship between wellbeing and retention. Cox *et al.* (2025b), for example, found that approximately six in ten police personnel had considered leaving policing due to concerns regarding their mental health and wellbeing. Whilst the present

study cannot determine whether wellbeing contributed to the resignation patterns identified within the FOI analysis, the concentration of voluntary resignations during the early stages of service suggests that this relationship warrants further investigation. Wellbeing may therefore represent an important contextual factor when seeking to understand police retention, even though its role cannot be established from the current data.

One potential avenue for supporting workforce wellbeing is the use of personalised and preventative interventions. For example, Cox *et al.* (2025b) reported encouraging early findings from a wearable technology initiative, with 27% of participants indicating that they felt less likely to leave policing and 43% reporting that they felt less likely to take sickness absence following participation. Whilst these findings remain exploratory and require further evaluation, they suggest that innovative approaches to wellbeing support may have potential benefits for both employees and organisations.

Taken together, the wider literature suggests that wellbeing should be viewed not solely as an individual concern but as a strategic workforce issue. However, future research is required to determine the extent to which wellbeing contributes to voluntary resignation and whether wellbeing-focused interventions influence longer-term retention outcomes.

The present findings suggest that expectations surrounding career progression, organisational support and professional development may change as individuals progress through policing education. New students were significantly more optimistic regarding promotion opportunities and placed greater importance on advancement than current students, indicating that career expectations may evolve through exposure to organisational realities. Whilst the present study cannot determine the reasons for this shift, the finding raises important questions regarding how workforce management practices shape employees perceptions of long-term career opportunities.

Traditionally, police forces have focused on workforce rewards such as pay, pensions and promotion opportunities, although previous research suggests that promotion pathways are often perceived as limited or unclear (Charman and Bennett 2022). Increasingly, however, employees also expect engagement from leaders, meaningful input into decisions affecting their working lives, and support for their broader wellbeing and professional development (Mercer 2025). This may reflect the changing nature of the employment relationship, whereby employees assess organisations not solely on financial rewards but also on the extent to which their wider needs and aspirations are recognised and supported.

Flexible working represents one example of this broader shift. UK legislation now provides employees with the right to request flexible working arrangements from the first day of employment, including variations to working hours, working patterns and work locations (Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023). Research suggests that flexible working can contribute positively to employee wellbeing and retention, although challenges remain regarding progression opportunities and organisational acceptance of non-traditional working arrangements (Newton and Huppatz 2020). Within policing specifically, organisational inflexibility has been identified as a factor contributing to voluntary resignation, particularly where individuals feel unable to reconcile personal commitments with operational demands (Charman and Tyson 2024).

At the same time, police organisations face legitimate operational challenges in implementing flexible working arrangements. Maintaining continual service delivery, ensuring adequate staffing levels and meeting unpredictable operational demands may limit the extent to which requests can be accommodated (Przibilla 2014). Research further suggests that employees who successfully secure flexible working arrangements may encounter unintended consequences, including reduced access to developmental opportunities, lower visibility to decision-makers and difficulties evidencing promotion criteria when compared with full-time colleagues (Dick 2009, Charlesworth and Robertson 2012).

Although the present study did not examine flexible working directly, the findings relating to promotion opportunities and career expectations suggest that workforce management practices may play an important role in shaping employees perceptions of their future within policing. Consequently, future research should examine how organisational flexibility, career development

opportunities and workforce policies influence organisational commitment and retention, particularly during the early stages of police careers where voluntary resignation appears most prevalent.

From a cultural perspective, flexible working may also be constrained within policing by the continuing stigmatisation of non-routine working patterns and perceptions that flexible workers demonstrate lower levels of organisational commitment (Jenkins 2000). Such perceptions can contribute to a culture of presenteeism, where visibility in the workplace is implicitly valued over outcomes or productivity. In this context, employees may be reluctant to request flexible working arrangements due to concerns regarding career progression, whilst managers may be hesitant to approve such requests because of operational pressures and workforce demands.

Previous research suggests that these tensions can contribute to frustration and dissatisfaction amongst employees, particularly where individuals perceive an incompatibility between personal needs and organisational expectations (Newton and Huppatz 2020, Charman and Tyson 2024). Whilst the present study did not examine flexible working directly, the identified differences between new and current students in perceptions of promotion opportunities and career expectations raise broader questions regarding how workforce policies and organisational culture shape employees perceptions of long-term career sustainability.

Consequently, policing organisations may benefit from considering how flexible working can be supported in ways that maintain operational effectiveness whilst reducing barriers to participation. This may include demonstrating that career progression is achievable irrespective of working patterns, promoting transparency in workforce processes, and increasing the use of strategic workforce planning and workforce modelling. Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, may offer additional opportunities to support these approaches through more sophisticated workforce planning and resource allocation (McKinsey 2025). However, the successful implementation of such initiatives is likely to depend upon organisational culture as much as organisational policy.

Leaders may therefore have an important role in shaping attitudes towards flexible working through their decisions, behaviours and communication. By challenging assumptions surrounding commitment, supporting equitable access to development opportunities, and modelling inclusive working practices, leaders may contribute to a culture in which flexibility is viewed as a legitimate workforce management tool rather than an indicator of reduced commitment.

Similar considerations apply to agile working, which extends beyond flexibility in working hours to encompass greater flexibility in where and how work is undertaken. In practice, this may include home working, adaptable working patterns and enhanced employee control over the organisation of work. Whilst the operational realities of policing mean that many roles require attendance at specific locations, there is nevertheless evidence that agile working can contribute positively to organisational commitment where implemented appropriately (Gašić *et al.* 2024). As such, agile working may represent another area worthy of consideration within broader discussions concerning workforce sustainability and retention.

However, the successful implementation of agile working is likely to depend upon the existence of trust between leadership and employees, alongside the empowerment of employee autonomy. Such conditions may be challenging to achieve within organisational cultures characterised by risk aversion, hierarchical decision-making and concerns regarding performance oversight. These challenges may be particularly relevant when considered alongside the present findings, which suggest that perceptions of senior leadership differ between new and current students. Whilst the study cannot determine why these differences occur, they highlight the importance of understanding how organisational experiences shape employees views of leadership and engagement over time.

In this context, policing organisations may benefit from looking beyond law enforcement for examples of how flexible and agile working practices have been successfully implemented whilst maintaining organisational performance and accountability. Although the transferability of such approaches will inevitably vary according to operational requirements, examining alternative

workforce management models may provide useful insights into how policing can adapt to changing employee expectations whilst maintaining effective service delivery.

More broadly, workforce talent management may benefit from greater emphasis on employee choice, voice and participation in career development decisions. This involves more than simply providing opportunities for consultation; it requires the creation of environments in which individuals feel psychologically safe to express preferences, raise concerns and engage in discussions regarding career pathways without fear of adverse consequences. Previous research suggests that such environments are supported by trust, transparency and consistent leadership behaviour, all of which are important components of organisational commitment.

The present findings do not establish that greater employee voice, flexible working or agile working will improve retention. However, the observed differences between new and current students in perceptions of senior leadership, promotion opportunities and career expectations suggest that organisational experiences may play an important role in shaping how individuals view their future within policing. Consequently, initiatives that strengthen trust, engagement, employee voice and career flexibility may warrant consideration as part of broader retention strategies.

Whilst such changes may be challenging to implement, evidence from multiple sectors suggests that organisations that successfully align workforce practices with employee expectations may benefit from higher levels of engagement, wellbeing and organisational commitment. The findings of the present study suggest that exploring these issues further may be particularly important given the concentration of voluntary resignations during the early stages of police careers.

Conclusion

This study highlights the scale and complexity of voluntary resignation within UK policing. The FOI analysis identified a clear concentration of voluntary resignations during the early stages of police careers, with particularly pronounced attrition among police staff. The student survey provided additional insight into the expectations and perceptions of individuals entering and progressing through police education. Whilst motivations associated with helping people and excitement about policing remained largely consistent between groups, significant differences emerged in perceptions of pay, career progression and senior leadership. In particular, current students reported lower levels of optimism regarding promotion opportunities and attributed less influence to senior leadership than new students. Together, these findings suggest that expectations associated with joining policing may evolve as individuals gain greater exposure to organisational life and policing practice.

Theoretical implications centre on the relationship between organisational commitment, leadership and motivation. Whilst the present study cannot establish causal explanations for voluntary resignation, the findings suggest that organisational factors such as leadership, career development opportunities, employee voice and workplace support may represent important areas for further investigation when seeking to understand police retention.

The practical implications of the study similarly highlight the need for retention strategies that extend beyond recruitment and pay alone. The findings suggest that policing organisations may need to pay greater attention to how career opportunities, leadership engagement, organisational culture and workforce expectations are experienced during the early stages of service. Whilst no single intervention is likely to resolve retention challenges, approaches that strengthen trust, transparency, wellbeing support, employee voice and career development may assist in sustaining organisational commitment over time.

As with all research, limitations apply. The survey data were drawn from 196 students enrolled on policing programmes at two universities and therefore may not be representative of all policing students or police officers. In addition, the survey captured perceptions at a single point in time and did not follow individuals longitudinally. Consequently, it is not possible to determine whether the

differences observed between new and current students reflect changes in perceptions over time or are attributable to other factors. Similarly, whilst the FOI analysis identifies the extent and timing of voluntary resignation, it cannot establish why individuals chose to leave policing.

Future research should therefore employ longitudinal approaches that follow individuals from recruitment through the early stages of their policing careers, examining how motivation, career expectations, organisational commitment, wellbeing and perceptions of leadership develop over time. Comparative studies between forces may also help explain the substantial variation in attrition rates identified within the FOI data. Finally, greater attention should be paid to police staff retention, given the significantly higher rates of voluntary resignation observed within this part of the policing workforce.

Ultimately, retaining skilled police officers and staff represents not only a financial concern but also an organisational and operational priority. The findings of the present study suggest that sustainable retention is unlikely to be achieved through isolated initiatives alone. Rather, policing organisations may need to consider how leadership, organisational culture, workforce practices and employee expectations interact to shape long-term commitment to the profession.

Author contributions

CRediT: **C. Cox-Forshaw:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft; **N. Davis-Crane:** Data curation; **R. Hagan:** Data curation, Formal analysis; **T. Blockley:** Conceptualization; **A. James:** Conceptualization.

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