Article

Reflections on organisational justice among police officers investigating rape and serious sexual offences in England and Wales

Linda Cooper[1] , Richard Harding[2] ,
Emma Williams[2] and Arun Sondhi[3]

Abstract

Organisational justice occurs when employees consider the actions and procedures within their workplace to be fair and equitable, but the evidence of whether and how this operates in a policing context is limited. We have used the concept of organisational justice to contextualise and examine the results from our data across five police constabularies, with a specific focus on investigators of rape and serious sexual offences. We share insights gained from interviews and focus groups from Operation Soteria, a nationwide policing and research collaboration to develop systemic improvements in the outcomes of rape and serious sexual offences cases. Primary data collected from 129 participants in interviews and focus groups suggest that police officers do not feel a sufficient investment in their learning and well-being needs. Feelings of being unsupported in the workplace reflect a lack of organisational justice, impacting on officers' capacity to support victims to the best of their ability. We make recommendations to enable transformational change in rape and serious sexual offences investigations, requiring an organisational shift and reframing the current learning offer for rape and serious sexual offences investigators.

Keywords

Learning, organisational justice, police, rape and serious sexual offences, well-being

[1]University of Suffolk, UK
[2]Anglia Ruskin University, UK
[3]Therapeutic Solutions (Addictions) Ltd, UK

Corresponding author:
Linda Cooper, Institute for Social Justice and Crime, University of Suffolk, Neptune Quay, Ipswich IP4 1QJ, UK.
Email: l.cooper7@uos.ac.uk

Defining organisational justice

The focus of this article is whether organisational justice exists and is recognised by police officers who investigate rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO). Existing literature, as drawn on below, contextualises organisational justice within policing generally (Bradford et al., 2014; Myhill and Bradford, 2013; Quinton et al., 2015; Williams and Cockcroft, 2018). Organisational justice is key to understanding policing behaviours and culture and if officers feel their organisation exhibits trust-worthy motives for both them and their publics. The importance of these issues around public/police trust, or lack of, was highlighted in the Baroness Casey review (Casey, 2023) and the need to re-examine the internal culture and behaviours within policing.

Organisational justice requires officers and staff to have a sense of legitimacy in the workplace, such as having a voice to ensure the outcomes they receive are fair and that they are treated with respect and dignity (Schafer, 2013; Tankebe, 2013). Organisational justice requires inclusive participation by, and empowerment of, employees to achieve professional satisfaction (Roberts and Herrington, 2013; Williams et al., 2022). The literature highlights the value of listening to employees and the positive effect it has on professionalisation across the public sector (Evetts, 2011) and suggests that employees who feel confident their views are being heard will contribute to workplace outcomes and will be more fulfilled in their job (Errida and Lofti, 2021). In policing, leaders who enable spaces for employees to feel empowered to participate meaningfully create environments of success (Farr-Wharton et al., 2021). The importance of organisational justice is recognised by the College of Policing (Quinton et al., 2015), including the tenets of respect and fairness in decision-making, attitudes and behaviour, in helping to foster long-term police legitimacy as well as improving public perceptions and external co-operation with the police. Indeed, police officers themselves suggest they need autonomy, strong leadership, support and to have a voice in the workplace to feel valued (Charman and Bennett, 2022).

For investigators, professionalism and credibility are linked to autonomy, highlighting the importance of giving legitimate authority to them to carry out their role as gatekeepers to the criminal and legal systems (Charman and Williams, 2021). Drawing these threads together, internal legitimacy occurs when process and cultures create an environment where investigators are equipped to do their job effectively and feel energised by their environment, which leads to improving the support they can offer externally to the public (Bradford and Quinton, 2014). Affective and practical inclusion in decision-making processes is often lost in policing culture, where organisational decisions are frequently 'top-down' (Charman and Bennett, 2022). In such contexts the approaches taken to meet internal and external scrutiny may undermine the discretion of the investigator in undertaking victim-survivor care (Fleming and Scott, 2008). Here the complex nature of supporting victim-survivors can be in opposition to a managerial approach, weakening investigators' autonomy (Bradford and Quinton, 2014). In parallel, if they perceive their senior leaders do not support and understand their health and well-being needs, they may be negatively affected (Correia, 2023).

Internal and external factors affecting organisation justice in a policing context

For organisational justice to be achieved, positive conditions need to be created within an affirming environment. In such conditions investigators are more likely to co-operate with internal authority and be outwardly confident in their work (Schafer, 2013). At the same time, the cultures and structures of a hierarchal work environments such as policing requires compliance and commitment from both the employer and employees to meet internal workplace goals, as well as officer and public needs (Roberts and Herrington, 2013). Externally the police work in a dangerous environment where they face daily physical and verbal harm on the streets from perpetrators of crime (Roberts and Herrington, 2013). A strong relationship has been identified between the challenging physical and emotional needs of being a police officer and organisational working conditions, which can contribute to poor health, particularly identified among female officers (Illias et al., 2024). As police practitioners face both external and organisational challenges on a daily basis, this study considers the repetitive nature of traumatic or distressing cases such as rape on investigators, including first response officers (FROs), who are often young in service, with limited experience, and may be the first to a crime scene (Marshall, 2023).

There is an argument that the effort required to undertake the job of policing is not valued and can become a factor in the decision-making process when officers leave the force (Charman and Bennett, 2022; Charman and Tyson, 2023). Charman et al.'s research into voluntary redundancies in the police suggests officers value their work and the nature of their roles, but the sense of officers having the knowledge and skills to undertake their role is an important element in achieving organisational justice (Charman and Tyson, 2023).

Professional development and well-being

Following Neyroud's (2011) recommendation for structural changes to policing training, Norman and Fleming (2021) continue to argue for access to learning and continuing professional development (CPD) as essential for professional and personal credibility. Having sufficient capacity and capability in an affirming working environment will affect positively both the well-being of investigators and the effectiveness of their work (Williams et al., 2022). Normative working routines can create additional pressures for those with childcare or care-giving responsibilities, particularly where there are incompatibilities between workplace demand and external relationship and caring roles at home (Charman and Tyson, 2023). If investigators are working significant hours and/or their work encroaches on their off-duty time, they will lack a sense of organisational justice and perceived fairness in the reward of their role (Duxbury et al., 2021). The Metropolitan Police (2011: 3) acknowledge it 'is sympathetic to the demands that needs make on the individual and is aware that, at times, it may be difficult to achieve a work/life balance', placing an expectation on officers that their home lives will be encroached upon if they undertake a role as a police officer. The issue of understanding operational demand on officers form an important part of the objectives for this study and are

documented additionally in the authors' other academic outputs (Maguire and Sondhi, 2022; Sondhi et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2022; Williams and Sondhi, 2022).

Well-being – considering trauma and safety

In addition, having limited access to effective learning impacts investigators' feeling of competence and their well-being in the workplace (Williams et al., 2022). In such circumstances, there can be strong associations between a lack of organisational support and investigator stress (Purba and Demou, 2019). In practice, there is an entrenched culture of police investigators continuing to work despite feeling unwell, to provide pragmatic and operational support for colleagues (Maguire and Sondhi, 2022). Well-being issues often remain hidden and investigators engage in suppressing their concerns and emotions as a coping mechanism (Lennie et al., 2021). The prevailing issue of the stigma of asking for help may present further barriers to support seeking (Bullock and Garland, 2018).

A key outcome for this study was to understand if there were any deleterious effects on officer well-being due to investigating RASSO cases. This included whether officers display symptoms of trauma and if trauma-informed practice is being followed for RASSO investigations. Employees of organisations who offer trauma-informed training programmes continue to demonstrate trauma-informed practices after the training (Fallot and Harris, 2009). However, even where organisational well-being offers exist, culturally normative pressures can cause investigators to ignore their own well-being issues, to reduce the burden on their team (Evans et al., 2013). However, emotional stability in the workplace leads to higher work-related performance and workforce resilience, suggesting the importance of an investment in well-being support (Winter, 2019). Manian et al. (2021) advocate for a more trauma-informed approach to organisational support. Tidmarsh (2021) advocates for the investigations of all RASSO cases to take a whole story, trauma-informed approach, which underpins the whole ethos of Operation Soteria (Hohl and Stanko, 2024), which is outlined in detail further in this article.

Illustrating the demands placed upon policing and the impacts of working with in its hierarchical and disciplined structures and their link to organisational justice during the pandemic frontline officers felt discriminated against due to the public facing nature of their role (Martin et al., 2023). The perceived organisational lack of concern for their personal safety during distancing measures created feelings of a lack of morale and trust (Charman et al., 2022).

The principles of organisational justice parallel those of a trauma-informed approaches, where workforces are enabled to feel physically and emotionally safe through the advocacy of safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, power and choice (Charman et al., 2022). In addition, investigators who are sensitive to the needs of a trauma-informed approach to victim-survivors of RASSO can acknowledge and respond appropriately to victim vulnerability and avoid re-traumatisation (Gillespie-Smith et al., 2020).

Another important, but hidden, area of police work which impacts on officer well-being is the task of meeting targets and thresholds, to demonstrate accountability and outcomes to a range of audiences including the public, politicians and internal leaders.

However, the pressures of meeting such target-driven approaches may be harmful to investigators' mental health (Hohl and Stanko, 2024). Investigators may prioritise the process of dealing with the crime, rather than the outcome desired by the victim-survivor themself (Hohl and Stanko, 2024). The impact of such approaches can lead to victim-survivors being labelled as passive and them feeling unsafe, unsupported and unwilling to report to the police in the future (Hohl and Stanko, 2024). In part, the attrition rate of victim-survivors in RASSO cases is associated with a lack of both good communication and fair treatment (Hohl and Stanko, 2024).

It is therefore clear from several sources that organisational justice is an important component in delivering effective and efficient policing, and that there are links to wider organisational practices such as learning, well-being and the capacity of its people, and the outcomes experienced by victim-survivors.

Current study

The discussion within this article focuses on one element, or pillar of work, of a large, national research project. Operation Soteria was developed as a unique collaborative project between academia and the police in England and Wales to deliver sustainable change to RASSO investigations. A footnote is included at the end of this article, which provides the overarching design of the entire study. Findings across all areas of investigation (pillars of work) led to the creation of resources which are now embedded within the new RASSO National Operating Model (NOM) for all forces in England and Wales (College of Policing, 2024). Operation Soteria and the introduction of the NOM has precipitated a significant shift in how RASSO cases are investigated (Allen et al., 2024; Hohl and Stanko, 2024; National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), 2024).

Methods

A mixed-methods approach was taken to the overall data collection, although this article focuses on the analysis of the qualitative data. The data collected aimed to understand the learning and development and well-being environments of RASSO investigators, police staff and trainers. Interviews and focus groups were the main data collection tool and were designed specifically for this pillar of work – Pillar 4, officer learning, development and well-being. A survey was also deployed, and the qualitative data from this is also considered in this article. All interviews and focus groups took place on Teams online platform, due to on-going Covid restrictions and to enable a greater number of officers to participate. Twenty-eight interviews and 23 focus groups were undertaken, with a total of 129 participants. All qualitative findings were analysed using an interpretive approach, supported by NVivo (a software analytical tool), by creating a coding structure of main themes and sub-themes, to generate a wider thematic framework, which centred participant voice and experience at the root of the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Independent inter-rater agreement was employed and all data were dual coded by the two members of the research team and findings were agreed with a further two researchers. Discrepancies were resolved by a team discussion, to ensure all findings were robust. In doing so, we sought to take account of the varied positionalities of the research team and

to reach outcomes through collective consensus. The settings for the fieldwork were five English and Welsh Police Force areas.

Ethical approval was provided by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee HRCE/3854. The British Sociological Association (BSA, 2017) ethical guidelines formed the basis of all interviews. All participants were provided with an information sheet and consented before participation.

As one example of managing our ethical processes, in one focus group, a participant became emotionally distressed recounting their experiences:

> You don't actually realise until you sit down, get asked about it and talk about it, you might not actually let it all out really. Like today, it's only when somebody actually sits down and says are you all right? Then you might realise, oh, actually no, I'm not all right.

We had developed pre-established protocols for managing participant distress which we initiated. The focus group was temporarily suspended and participants offered support and the opportunity to stop. Following intervention, they felt able to continue. As per our protocols, we followed up with the affected participants after the focus group and signposted additional support mechanisms. This is a powerful example of how self-resilience is driving investigators to the limits of their emotional capacity and demonstrates the extreme levels of coping they tolerate.

Participants were officers of any rank who were either part of the Operation Soteria project, therefore their work had a significant focus on RASSO offences; they were in specialist units and/or dealt regularly with RASSO cases, such as frontline officers. The inclusion criteria were based on a purposive sampling approach, which was employed to ensure we had participants who met these criteria. A Project Manager was the single point of contact with participant forces to organise interviews and focus groups. The Operation Soteria administrator in each force worked with the Project Manager to identify suitable participants. Noting the potential challenges of consent in hierarchical and disciplined organisations all participants were given the opportunity to not participate from the study at the first point of contact, in writing via the participant consent form and at the start of the interviews, focus groups or survey participation. Individual forces and officers' anonymity have been preserved using rank only and a numerical identifier used by the research team. Interviews and focus groups were recorded on Teams and an approved transcription service was used.

Interview and focus group findings

Two main themes and two sub-themes emerged from the data in relation to organisational justice: (1) a lack of investment in officers' training and upskilling and sub-themes (1a), the importance of access to professional development and (1b) the need for reflective practice, demonstrating the pressure of operational demand with limited support and resources and (2) self-resilience covering for a lack of organisational resilience, and sub-themes (2a) officers' sense of duty to victim-survivors and colleagues above their own well-being, and (2b) covering for shortfalls in resourcing and resilience.

Results

We set out below the themes which emerged from our analysis, along with illustrative quotes. We address the implications of these thematics in the discussion section that follows.

A lack of investment in officers' training and upskilling

The importance of access to professional development. We share below quotes from FROs and investigators (DC to DCI, and civilian) involved in RASSO investigations from the participant forces. All questions posed of the officers related to their learning and well-being climates. There is a clear link between the perceived level of support through the learning offer and welfare climates within organisations (Williams and Sondhi, 2022). Their responses through our analysis enabled us to consider their perceptions of trust, fairness and equity in the workplace, and thus an understanding their sense of organisational justice. We found that while investigators have a high tendency to prioritise the public's needs first, the provision of specialist knowledge is lacking and even when it is provided, there is no capacity for investigators to pause their case load for learning and development activities.

> Due to operational demand, lack of staff and overwhelming workload, training, learning and development and welfare provision is pretty much non-existent and when it is, it is often cancelled. (RASSO Investigator)

> There is a lack of regular update training given in respect of RASSO cases. Our force has adopted e-learning and videos as its primary tool for training which isn't particularly effective. Other than the CID SSAIDP courses there is a lack of continual update training and so within a short space of time there is a sense of deskilling. Workloads are too high to enable officers to feel comfortable about attending training. (RASSO investigator)

> Training is non-existent. There is an expectation to attend various seminars however due to workload demand, live jobs, case files and court deadlines this is not an option. (RASSO investigator)

Investigators and supervisors acknowledged the impact of the shifting workforce demographics, loss of experience and the reliance on learning 'on-the-job':

> Officers with limited knowledge of rape investigations are then thrown in the 'deep end' and have to make do and struggle. Their training and experience then comes from their peers and their knowledge. (Senior Supervisor)

Police investigators regard the need for adequate training as fundamental, yet there is a perceived lack of value in this learning within policing organisations (Norman and Fleming, 2021).

> I would love to get as much training and L&D in order to better equip myself and assist managing RASSO's etc – but it is not an option. We just have to learn as we go along. (RASSO Investigator)

> [RASSO investigation] . . . is an important area of policing, it needs highlighting, it needs to part of continuous learning and development so that police officers are doing the best as possible for the victims and obtaining best evidence. (RASSO Investigator)

> I believe it is vitally important to maintain constant training on key skills to ensure your standards and ability don't slip. (RASSO Investigator)

Officers spoke of wanting more training, but highlighted the issues of abstraction from cases, compounded by a shortfall in availability of specialist courses:

> I think if you can get on a course, the courses are great. But that's it, it's getting the courses. There isn't the trainers, there isn't the time and there isn't the money to get the training that we really need. And that's obvious. (FRO)

Frontline response officers are often the first investigators to engage RASSO victims but often lack specialist training, despite occupying a critical juncture in the investigative process (Williams and Sondhi, 2022).

> There is no training whatsoever for the initial response. A short low-quality video of the EEKs [early evidence] kit which was months before I went out of initial training and that was it. (FRO)

> The only training I have received is initial training/tutorship. I have had to ask for advice from other departments/colleagues to develop myself. I feel that more training could be given, in regards to initial attendance, signposting and support to victims. (FRO)

The need for reflective practice. Reflective practice is an important element for continuous assessment of work-based interaction for critical learning to take place. Reflective practice and time for supervision are limited, as operational demand takes precedence over learning as a priority, further reducing the time available to attend training sessions or engage in reflective learning.

> There is no structure in place to review, or quality assure ABE [Achieve Best Evidence] interviews conducted by SOLOs [victim liaison officers] or similarly trained DC's. Feedback or recognition of good practice is infrequent. (SOLO)

> Not all teams have dedicated time for CPD. high workloads and lack of staff are not conducive to a reflective and learning environment because staff are all consumed by daily operational demand. (RASSO Investigator)

This short-term approach, with a lack of ring-fencing for learning time is in opposition to the need for sustainable, organisational change and tends to undermine organisational justice by destabilising essential pillars of its construction and maintenance.

Self-resilience covering for a lack of organisational resilience

Officers' sense of duty to victim-survivors and colleagues above their own well-being. The importance of duty to victims and team is bounded by respondents' views of responsibility for

and to victims and colleagues, mediating how they perceive and engage their own health and well-being. The interviews emphasised respondents' sense of collegiate responsibility to each other, and duty to victims, where investigators de-prioritise dealing with their own needs and well-being concerns, for fear of putting additional pressure on colleagues, or letting victims down:

> I refuse to go off sick because I didn't want my colleagues to pick up my work. My GP and the counsellor both continuously said to me, you need to go off sick. You need to do this. You need to do that. And I kept saying, I can't. The moment I do that, I am then affecting my colleagues and putting them under more pressure. And that's the problem. That's the position we were in. There wasn't a solution. And although we're not as bad as we were then, it's still the same premise. (Senior Supervisor)

> Staff are struggling to keep up with the demand. They are good officers who want to do the best by their victims. Delays with the CPS, the constant demand of prisoners taking over as a priority for work they had planned, court delays are all contributory factors to making them feel like they are failing to do the job to a high standard. (Senior Supervisor)

> I know I am failing victims due to not having the time to complete all the lines of enquiry in a timely manner . . . and not being able to provide the regular contact and support that they ought to be receiving. This causes me significant stress and anxiety, both in and out of work, which in turn makes it harder for me to be effective and productive when I am in work. This feeds back into a negative spiral by increasing my anxiety and making me feel that I am failing people. (RASSO Investigator)

More senior officers particularly demonstrated the necessity for self-reliance/resilience in the interviews and focus groups. In every interview with officers from Senior Leadership Teams, investigators suggested their seniority reflected the need to look after their own well-being and without the need to be supported. The unanimous response from all senior leaders to the question '*Who looks after your well-being?*' was, '*I do*'.

Shortfalls in resourcing and self-resilience

Competing demands between work–life balance can cause issues in personal relationships, familial, and home life, with reduced periods of leave and less recuperation time away from traumatic work scenarios (Cox, 2016). Our analysis echoed this finding:

> We are and have been extremely understaffed for quite some time, which has led to unmanageable workloads and people working on their days off just to try and stop themselves getting stressed. However, this just perpetuates the cycle because management are now relying on people's goodwill in doing this instead of actually addressing resourcing. It is also detrimental to the wellbeing of staff as some are having literally no down time. A number of people within our department have been off sick for significant periods and we have had people transfer to other forces. (RASSO Investigator)

> A number of officers are having to work additional hours to get through work which is having an adverse affect on welfare, mental health and home life. (RASSO Investigator)

> I spend most of my 'work' time guiding others who need assistance, the only reason my workload is manageable is because I do a lot in my own time. (RASSO Investigator)

In such circumstances supervisors felt significant pressure to keep officers at work:

> I've had to put someone back together again, because I know I need them to come in tomorrow and I put them back together again because I need another day out of them and that makes me feel dirty and horrible [. . .] it makes me cross because we're not doing right for the public and we're not doing right by the staff that work for us. (Senior Supervisor)

Discussion

Building on from the themes which emerged from our analysis, in this section, we seek to contextualise our results within the wider literature. In doing so, we address the individual themes and the wider implications of our findings. We address each of the themes we identified in turn, before returning to a more general discussion.

A lack of investment in officers' training and upskilling

The importance of access to professional development. For organisational justice to occur, fundamental foundations such as training and well-being support need to be in place to ensure investigators are well trained, equipped and supported to undertake their roles successfully and to the best of their ability. Jackson et al. (2011) suggests that for the publics to have trust in the police, investigators need to display good intentions and be competent in their role, underpinned by technical competency.

Cockcroft et al. (2018) refer to Heslop's (2011) findings that investigators need to both acquire and transfer knowledge through a participatory process that enables the transition from new recruits to 'becoming' investigators. For formal learning, the transfer of knowledge from classroom to practice is dependent on top-down support from the organisation and senior investigators (Fleming and Wingrove, 2017).

Training remains a tool for capacity building and not capability building (Copley, 2011). The widely employed omnicompetent investigative model relies on investigators having generic policing skills, reflecting the need to cover shortfalls in capacity of staffing, with a deficit of specialist training to support specialist RASSO cases. The absence of formal CPD opportunities demonstrates the need for revisiting formal and informal learning at both local and national levels (Neyroud, 2011).

In an already stretched workforce, it becomes increasingly important to compensate by increasing individual capacity and capability. For investigators working with RASSO cases, there is a need for additional specialist knowledge, to enable learning to become iterative through reflective practice, as well as the need to upskill more experienced investigators (Christopher, 2015). While officers value training, operational demand continues to dominate whether they have the capacity to attend learning opportunities, in the absence of forces ring-fencing time for learning. Training in many instances is therefore perceived by some officers to be 'lip service' to a transactional offer, rather than being seen as an opportunity to invest in the officers themselves.

The need for reflective practice

Reflective practice allows investigators the time to reflect on their actions and build positive working relationships (College of Policing, 2020). Reflective practice also enables supervisors to work closely with less experienced investigators, building skills and knowledge and to enable frontline officers to carry out their role more effectively (Norman and Fleming, 2021). Christopher (2015) argues for a critically reflective police service, which would support investigators working in difficult social and emotional operational circumstances.

Undertaking reflective practice would support all investigators, but particularly those who are demonstrating self-resilience, to compensate for where organisational resilience is lacking. The lack of organisational justice is evident, where transactional decisions are made with limited time for strategic understanding.

Self-resilience covering for a lack of organisational resilience

Officers' sense of duty to others above themselves. We argue that there is an overwhelming sense that as well as collective resilience, self-resilience is the main way in which investigators are coping with their working responsibilities to the public and themselves. RASSO investigators feel a duty to their victim-survivors and want to do the best job they can, foregoing training, where available, to spend more time working on their cases. Investigators feel further bound to their colleagues, to manage the demand and workload together, so resilience is provided by the investigators themselves at the expense of their own welfare (Maguire and Sondhi, 2022). Investigators are finding ways to manage organisational shortfalls in resources and lack of time, while having to support others.

To support other officers, investigators in leadership positions can embed positive behaviours and enhance the well-being of their colleagues, through modelling of their own interactions and promotion of good working conditions (Farr-Wharton et al., 2021). Findings from Laschinger and Fida (2014) identified the relationship between senior investigators promoting positive well-being and reduced levels of burnout among their teams. However, transactional leadership is perceived to be the norm (Van Wart, 2013). This on-going sense of self-resilience does not acknowledge the lack of support or the effects that coping with this level of pressure has on the home environment.

Shortfalls in resourcing and self-resilience. High workload demand and a poor work–home life balance add to the creation of an unwell workforce (Duxbury et al., 2021). Duran et al. (2019) acknowledge that investigators are influenced positively by strong social groups or relationships as outlets for decompression of traumatic situations both within and external to the workplace. However, investigators who are uncomfortable with sharing concerns regarding stress or perceived on-going stigma of not wanting to show signs of a lack of coping increase their possibilities of becoming unwell (Lennie et al., 2021).

Wider implications

Through our analysis of the data, it emerged how a lack of organisational justice impacts on investigators abilities to be able to undertake their day-to-day roles and influences the

capacity in which they can support the RASSO victims. We argue that organisational justice is eroded in circumstances where there is pressure on investigators to maintain unrealistic workloads, to forego vital training, self-care and to meet organisational targets and outcomes, further impacting on out of workspaces and overall stressors and anxieties (Williams et al., 2022). This diminishes individual investigator resilience and affects the perceptions of victim-survivors of the support provided by the police. Investigators articulated that they should be empowered to attend training and maintain a specialist knowledge of RASSO victim-survivor care, rather than having to prioritise organisational process over fairness for victim-survivors.

The operating landscape of policing has a substantial deficit in funding, resulting in the shortfall of staffing, training and well-being resources (Gov.UK, 2020). Given this there are inevitably personal, professional and pragmatic dilemmas for all investigators, regardless of rank. Lack of time, high demand/workload, the impediments of organisational bureaucracies and/or under-resourcing are not specific to any rank, and these factors were, almost without exception, relevant to everyone who provided data. Organisational justice has the capacity to be empowering for investigators, by supporting their professional competence and confidence to do their jobs well and fulfil their roles. The uplift of new officers is solving one problem with increased numbers simultaneously creating another, creating an influx of enthusiastic, yet inexperienced investigators (Gov.UK, 2020). Without dedicated time for supervision, ringfenced training and the provision of sufficient training resources, new officers often lack the support of supervisors, who are trying to support colleagues on top of their own, high workloads. We suggest that as these elements coalesce, they create a perfect storm, degrading organisational justice and leading to well-being issues, and further detracting from offering a victim-centred investigation, where the victim-survivor and their experience should be the priority in the process (Gillespie-Smith et al., 2020).

Extreme levels of coping have been identified and draw on issues of organisational justice and the knock-on effect on victim-survivor care and responsibility to the wider publics. Predictors of emotional exhaustion can include the issues associated with dealing with negative public perceptions and behaviour towards investigators, as well as significant administrative workload (Bullock and Garland, 2018). Organisational justice needs to be in place to create an environment where the internal climate places well-being and learning as central pillars in mitigating the issues that investigators face both inside and outside of the workplace (Wolter et al., 2019). Duran et al. (2019) argue that the police force has a psychological contract with its investigators, to protect them against the exposure to physical and mental ill health. Dick (2006) highlights the importance of the terms of the exchange within a psychological contract, where both parties need to agree on terms of interactions between ranks. Where psychological contracts are broken, then organisational justice is also contravened.

The varying levels of management within a hierarchal working structure, in addition to the effects of policy and political macro-level decisions beyond the immediate policing context, create additional barriers to help-seeking (Duran et al., 2019). In such circumstances, the lack of organisational justice further draws on individual investigators' reserves of resilience.

We found that there is an overwhelming level of self-resilience among RASSO investigators. We consider they are displaying extreme levels of 'keeping going', to the detriment of their immediate professional, welfare and health concerns. The pressure not to acknowledge or action lack of knowledge or impacts on well-being has the potential for investigators to present eventually with more severe psychosocial morbidities encompassing burnout symptoms, including depersonalisation, disassociation and emotional exhaustion (Maguire and Sondhi, 2022).

Based on our fieldwork, we suggest collective, individual resilience of RASSO investigators is covering for a lack of organisational resilience. In these circumstances, we suggest that the pillars of organisational justice of respect and dignity for investigators are not being met, with excessive workloads undermining their self-resilience and contributing to their stress, leading to a chronically unwell workforce. Under resourcing, high workloads and the nature of working demands lead to a lack of time available for investigators to spend on victim-survivors, with negative connotations on organisational and justice, self-care, with negative impacts on their health and well-being, and professional competency development and maintenance, with negative impacts on their competence and confidence in role.

We acknowledge that every force has independent organisational accountability, with different strategic and tactical approaches developed to meet their individual needs. For example, some forces have omnicompetent Criminal Investigation Departments (CIDs) managing RASSO cases while others have specialist RASSO investigation teams, focusing solely on sexual offence investigation. Therefore, a 'one size fits all' approach is not necessarily an appropriate solution. Here, approaches that can be considered functionally equivalent, where forces can deploy proposals to meet the needs of their force while also addressing the needs of investigators and victim-survivors, are required (Hohl and Stanko, 2024). As a result of this study, we would recommend the need for greater organisational recognition and responsibility for the rebalancing of organisational justice, through in part the provision of specialist knowledge and support for investigator learning, development and well-being. Personal efficacy and good health for the whole force, solid leadership and management are needed, with strategic-level outcomes delivered in collaboration with investigators. We would argue that it is critical to interlink well-being, learning and development and professional practice if organisational justice is to be achieved. This includes the enhancement of professional perspectives in RASSO investigations, through effective supervision, which is central to internal and external delivery and investigations.

We hope that the willingness from investigators, trainers and police staff we have met across our research to make the change that is needed for RASSO investigations is supported. Transformational change, moving away from transactional targets and measurements, is necessary to enable RASSO investigators to look after themselves, and be equipped to carry out their job to the best of their ability, and deliver the promise of better outcomes for victim-survivors.

Operation Soteria is a ground-breaking study due to its size and reach across all 43 forces in England and Wales. Our work on Pillar 4 has allowed investigators the opportunity to voice their issues with their learning and well-being environments, leading to

the changes in the way learning materials have been repurposed and forces assessing their learning and well-being opportunities. The improved access and conditions to learning and greater recognition of the need for investigator well-being can only improve their sense of organisational justice. We acknowledge some forces are still in the process of negotiating change, but the implementation of the NOM has demanded a focus on RASSO business. The work outlined in this article reflects a focus on RASSO investigators, but we suggest learning can be taken from these findings and applied across other areas of policing, since our participants were drawn from across a range of functions which encompassed RASSO investigation. We have made recommendations for continuing to improve the organisational offer to investigators, to empower them in their support and care for victim-survivors and enhance their sense of, and the reality of, organisational justice. If investigators are equipped to do their job well and given the time to prioritise victim-survivor experience, we can begin the change process that will make greater organisational justice for investigators and greater procedural fairness for victim-survivors possible.

Limitations to the study

We acknowledge that there are limitations to our work. This article addresses the findings from interviews and focus groups with 5 of the 43 forces in England and Wales and may not be representative. However, our subsequent work in this area suggests the findings set out here are more widely applicable to other policing organisations. As the changes of the NOM take effect, we will be in a better position to review our findings in relation to the national picture. The rollout of the NOM has included the continued support of the NPCC alongside the academic team, to collaborate on ensuring the best ways of implementation across all forces. In addition, such a large volume of data was collected that some pillars are undertaking secondary analysis on their original work, including Pillar 4. There is the potential that the increase in knowledge into learning, development and well-being for RASSO investigators could be usefully replicated across other areas of police work.

Operation Soteria is a 4-year project to date, and its implementation is continuing at the point of writing this article. Therefore, the authors acknowledge that our findings and thought processes have naturally developed as the knowledge base has expanded, but the article presented here reflects accurately the discussions and analysis at the point of the data collection.

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical relationship between organisational justice and the well-being, efficacy and professional integrity of RASSO investigators. The voices of participants reveal a policing environment where individual resilience is stretched to compensate for systemic organisational shortcoming, particularly in training, supervision and workload management. When organisational justice is compromised, not only are investigators left vulnerable to burnout and emotional exhaustion, but the quality of victim-survivor care also suffers, undermining public trust and procedural fairness.

Operation Soteria has illuminated the urgent need for structural reform, advocating for a shift from a focus on transactional metrics to models that prioritises well-being, learning and professional development in policing. The implementation of the NOM and the repurposing of learning materials mark promising steps forward, yet continued commitment is essential. Forces must tailor their approaches to local contexts while upholding shared principles of dignity, respect and support for investigators and victim-survivors.

Ultimately, empowering investigators through enhanced organisational justice is not just a matter of internal policy – it is a foundational requirement for delivering compassionate, effective and victim-centred justice. By investing in the health, capability and capability of those who serve within its organisations, policing can move towards a more resilient, equitable future for both investigators and the communities they protect.

ORCID iDs

Linda Cooper https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9103-4625
Richard Harding https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3839-9366
Emma Williams https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7013-3376
Arun Sondhi https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4748-5522

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Author biographies

Linda Cooper is Associate Professor and Deputy Director of the Institute for Social Justice and Crime, University of Suffolk, and an Honorary Visiting Senior Fellow at Anglia Ruskin University. Her research focus is on well-being and learning, and the intersection of topics including sexual violence, education and uniformed organisations.

Richard Harding is Senior Research Fellow, Centre of Excellence in Equity for Uniformed Public Services, Anglia Ruskin University. His current research focus is on organisational justice, learning and well-being, and organisational change and cultures in uniformed public services.

Emma Williams is Director of the Centre of Excellence in Equity for Uniformed Public Services and Professor in Applied Research Across Uniformed Public Services, Anglia Ruskin University. Her research focus is professionalisation of uniformed public services, organisational justice, VAWG and well-being.

Arun Sondhi is Associate Professor at Leeds Beckett University, Director of Therapeutic Solutions Ltd and Senior Research Fellow at Anglia Ruskin University. His research spans addiction recovery, policing, and criminal justice alongside an interest in health and well-being in uniformed services.