Rethinking success in policing: a moderation model of specialism's interaction with self-reported competence, specialism endorsement, wellbeing and organisational support

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Abstract

This study explored specialism within policing in England and Wales, aiming to identify how personal, social, and contextual factors influence the implementation and perception of specialist roles and units. Through an online survey designed to capture current, former, and retired officers' views on their competence, job satisfaction, and organisational support, the study sought to quantitatively assess whether 209 officers perceived specialism as beneficial for policing. Qualitative insights on survey responses were also captured. Previous research showed that, while specialism is widely adopted in policing, its operational effectiveness and the clarity of its definition are not nationally established. Many officers reported that the level of organisational support and specialist role availability can affect how satisfied they are with their police force. In this study, work satisfaction levels, wellbeing, and competence were reportedly higher for officers with prior experience of specialism. Moderation and mediation analyses showed that the interaction between specialism, organisational dynamics, and the other scale variables has substantial implications for officers' self-perception of competence and overall job satisfaction. The findings also highlight the need for a clearer understanding and better contextualisation of specialism within police forces to enhance the effectiveness of specialist units and promote officers' wellbeing. This novel research underscores the importance of fostering supportive environments that empower officers to thrive in specialist roles. It also suggests that officers' needs and evidence-based practice should inform systemic change for specialism.

Keywords Police specialism · Policing · Specialist units · Police officers · Wellbeing · Organisational support

Introduction

Police specialism can manifest in many different ways, including different forms of specialist units, knowledge, and specialist roles routinely mentioned by police forces. Despite the breadth of concepts that specialism can cover, its underpinning mechanisms, effectiveness, and reception among police officers are scarcely investigated. Evidence from Barbin and colleagues (2025) highlighted a lack of clarity on what specialism means in practice for police personnel – outside arbitrary descriptions – and showed that

its definition and characteristics are frequently implied and inferred by high-ranking police officers and forces more broadly. It is difficult to understand whether specifically appointed teams of police officers are implementing functions, expertise, or policing skills because they hold specialist knowledge or, rather, if their specialism is presumed. Although widely and routinely adopted, it is also apparent that specialism is not always understood by police personnel nor contextualised by police forces within day-to-day duties and role expectations (Wigert & Agrawal, 2018). This makes it impossible to know how police officers recognise or view specialist skills or perceive their competence in relation to – and because of – specialism, but most especially if officers and police forces' drive to upskill is solely driven by training availability and imposed force expectations.

While theoretical frameworks for specialism are underdeveloped, several studies have hinted at the importance of individual (e.g., competence, job satisfaction, wellbeing)

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and work-related factors (managerial support, resource investments, training) for successful policing outcomes. For instance, the influence of competence and organisational climate on police work and performance has been explored, with some authors focusing on self-legitimacy, police identity, or organisational justice (Prince et al., 2022; Workman-Stark, 2024). Additional research revolved around more specific issues like burnout incidence amongst police officers and the influence of organisational support on wellbeing (Baker et al., 2023). A study published by Oliver et al. (2022) took a more dynamic approach and applied principles of the Demand Resources and Individual Effects model (DRIVE) to a British police force organisational setting to see how multidimensional variables associated with the workplace (work demand, satisfaction and targets) can influence police officers' wellbeing. Outside single studies, however, broader interpretations of the implications of specialism on burnout, wellbeing, and managerial pressure on organisational climate, performance, and successful policing outcomes have been overlooked.

Contextualising effectiveness and measures of police success

Measuring police success and efficiency is speculated to be an effective way to quantify if police forces are meeting pre-established objectives and are adequately distributing human and financial resources at both organisational and force levels. A good example is the annual PEEL (Police Efficiency, Effectiveness and Legitimacy) inspections conducted by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary for Police and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS). Direct and indirect measurements of police success have been routinely implemented within and outside England and Wales in the last two decades and are primarily based on crime performance outputs (Putra et al., 2023; Sparrow, 2015). For instance, one of the most common indirect ways police success has been measured is through crime surveys, where encounters with police personnel are anonymously described by members of the public (Hodgkinson et al., 2019). Researchers, however, have raised substantial concerns about relying on public perceptions of police work and crime statistics, as they have both failed to accurately capture the complexity of organisational dynamics in the police (Hine & Davenport-Klunder, 2022). Although widely used, an investigation on the reliability of questionnaires directed at members of the public, specifically on police performance, conducted by Maslov (2015, p. ii) highlighted that "[survey] questions tend to be unstandardized, inconsistent, and at times, have poor choice of wording, making comparisons across time and place impossible" and added that "such inconsistent measurement of police performance

runs the risk of poorly evaluating performance, policies and practices […] leading to inefficient and ineffective policing and ultimately compromising public safety" in a Canadian sample (Maslov, 2015, p. 3). The unreliability of measuring police success via extrinsic factors includes challenges around the perpetual fluctuation of crime incidence due to external variables, the lack of agreement on what constitutes accurate measures of success (Brown, 2021), poor geographical reach (Kim, 2022), and biased investigations. Relying on external variables to gauge performance outputs was also linked to underreporting and dysfunctional decision-making among high-ranking police officers (Greenberg & Nunamaker, 2005). Concerningly, focusing on extrinsic measures increased the likelihood of focusing on performance measures that did not necessarily align with the needs of police personnel (de Maillard & Savage, 2018), showing senior management failed to consider aspects of policing that might be important for responding police officers (Crous, 2010). This leads to irreparable disconnections between management expectations and operational realities. Top-down recommendations also overlook individual talents, failing to valorise specialist skills that could have been otherwise essential for policing roles (Shane, 2010).

Amid high criticism of police performance and effectiveness in England and Wales, comparative league tables were introduced to directly monitor police performance through a ranking system, raising even more concerns about the so-called 'target-driven culture' in policing (Curtis, 2015). Moore and Braga (2003) reported that an overreliance on extrinsic police performance was shown to limit police forces' ability to motivate change and engage more effectively with members of the public. To shift the focus towards more dynamic constructs of success, the College of Policing (2023) outlined several measures – also identified as key performance indicators (KPIs) – tailored to track and improve policy practices for the investigation of rape and sex offences in England and Wales. KPIs include different areas of improvement, including but not limited to better outcomes for victims, improved procedural fairness, and targeting repeat sex offenders. Despite this being a more inclusive framework to measure success, it still consists of top-down guidance that does not consider interrelated factors that can hinder police performance and faults related to inadequate organisational support, competence and resources (Werner-de-Sondberg, 2008). For instance, inadequate training fails to fill the gaps between top-bottom theoretical frameworks and real-life challenges encountered by police forces, with personnel appearing ill-equipped to address complex investigative dynamics (Miles-Johnson, 2023). Collier (2001) also discusses how an overall lack of clear expectations about police roles and responsibilities adds to the complexity of adequately measuring police

performance, which is naturally associated with subjective interpretations of what is a suitable success parameter.

A performance-oriented culture may lead police chiefs to prioritise targets and crime outcomes over personnel needs and challenges, potentially compromising long-term investments for better suspect and victim handling and raising public concerns on police integrity, ethics, and accountability (UK Parliament, 2021). To address the complications surrounding measures of success, Hibberd (2021) has suggested differentiating *apparent performance* (top-bottom, based on extrinsic measures of crime and success indicators) from *actual performance*, intended as an aspect of policing concerned with the direct experience of how well police officers do on the job, and how they make use of the resources they have at disposal. According to Hibberd (2021), exploring the latter can allow a better dimensional examination of both officers' efficiency and capability on the job. A report from the House of Commons (2023, p. 18) urged police forces to address toxic performance-associated dynamics before policing can organically move towards "a regime that sought to identify fitness to practise the profession of a police officer [over a] separate, rigid misconduct and performance systems in ensuring that those in the service have the attributes, skills and values to do the job well. […] This would foster internal perceptions of fairness amongst practitioners whilst creating a less adversarial system and one more likely to support a culture of learning and development. It could also help reinforce the status of policing as a skilled profession".

Overall, traditional success metrics have proven to be limited in providing a comprehensive perspective of what is perceived as success in policing. More context-sensitive evaluation methods that focus on perceptions of specialism could help shed light on what police officers believe is working and not working in their police force, which in turn could inform improvements in practice.

The current study

Extrinsic measures of police success do not focus on systemic policing challenges nor evidence-based guidelines, increasing the risk of promoting malpractice and data manipulations (Hodgkinson et al., 2019). Even more problematic is the absence of adequate parameters and research that can inform the utility of specialism and its endorsement in policing. The present study took an interactive, analytical perspective to measure for the first time how concepts like specialism, organisational support, wellbeing, and perceived competence dynamically interact in a policing context. The data reflect the nationwide perspective of retired, former, and serving police officers belonging to all 43 forces in England and Wales. Participants were the first

sample ever used to quantitatively measure the perceived effectiveness and endorsement of police specialism from the perspective of officers themselves. Since the study was based on officers' views, it was possible to focus on other outcome variables that they perceived as related to their performance. These internal measures of success shed a unique light on what police officers would like to see prioritised. The chosen inductive approach collated evidence-based perceptions on the impact of specialism and relates to the concept of *actual performance* theorised by Hibberd (2021). The research sought to create, for the first time, a moderation model of specialism prioritising internal variables of success. The authors were inspired by the DRIVE model (Mark & Smith, 2008), a frameworks investigating the dynamic relationship between individual factors and organisational climate in the workplace. In an adaptation of the DRIVE model to a policing context, Oliver et al. (2022) assessed interpersonal and work-related variables to create an overview of the factors influencing police officers' perception of job stress and wellbeing. Findings from Oliver et al. (2022, p. 29,301) are important for this research, as they showed that "if work demands are present and perceived as stressful then they can be detrimental to PWB [perception of job stress and wellbeing] outcomes", suggesting that motivational and individual characteristics can moderate police officers' wellbeing, and potentially additional variables, in stressful work environments. To the authors' knowledge, there is no study that has looked at how specialism relates to both individual and organisational factors in policing for England and Wales. Despite substantial dissatisfaction of police personnel with organisational support and guidance received (Bhui et al., 2016; Wigert & Agrawal, 2018), the blame is frequently shifted to specialism – defined as potentially elitist and harmful for the workforce – without it having effectively been evidentially proven through quantitative research. With this in mind, the study aimed to identify if specialism could be a protective factor in policing. The relationship between specialism endorsement, competence, and job satisfaction was also tested, and the following research questions were addressed:

- RQ1. Do specialist police officers show higher levels of confidence, job satisfaction, and greater wellbeing compared to those working for non-specialist units?
- RQ2. Are police officers who previously worked for specialist units more likely to endorse the development of general specialism and specialism for sex offences (e.g., specialist units, specialist roles, specialist training)?
- RQ3. Can organisational support and having worked for a specialist unit influence specialism endorsement, competence, wellbeing, and job satisfaction?

- RQ4. Can any of the measured variables predict wellbeing scores amongst police officers?

Methods

Design

A mixed-method correlational research design with elements of moderation and mediation analysis was used. The chosen methodology allowed for an in-depth investigation of interactions and relationship testing among several variables that might facilitate or hinder specialism implementation and officers' wellbeing. An online survey was drafted to measure these interactions. As supported by Regmi et al. (2016), surveys are easily accessible and very cost-effective tools that allow for a rapid collection of data related to vast groups of participants that are generally out of reach, like police officers.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study [blinded for review] was granted by [blinded for review] on the 2nd of January 2024. No identifying information was collected (e.g., gender, age of the participant, name, or location), and participants had the right to withdraw at any time until data analysis commenced. Surveyed officers agreed that the data could be used for publication purposes in line with privacy protection and confidentiality rights, which were preserved at all stages. Officers were also reassured that their employees and forces would have had no way of knowing if they took part in the survey.

Participants

Officers from all police forces in England and Wales were invited to participate, as well as retired officers. There were no participation restrictions based on the years of experience accumulated in their role, the type of crime investigated, or the level and kind of specialism. The only inclusion criterion was that they had to have worked (predominately) in policing in England and Wales, and therefore three police officers were automatically screened out as they carried out most of their policing duties outside England and Wales, in Scotland, France, and Canada. Three hundred and four participants started completing the survey, and of the 301 valid initial responses, 209 police officers answered most questions (69.4% completion rate and 30% cut-off rate) and were therefore retained for analysis.

The final sample included 133 police officers (63.6%) who reported having worked and/or were currently working for a specialist unit and 76 (36.4%) who never did. For officers who provided further information on their employment, the majority were serving officers ($N=170$, 81.3%), while the remaining were either retired or former officers ($N=39$, 18.7%). Participants' ranks ranged from Detective Chief Inspector/Chief Inspector ($N=7$) to Detective Sergeant/Sergeant ($N=32$) and Detective Constable/Trainee Detective Constable ($N=45$). The most common rank was Police Constable ($N=87$). A total of 92 participants had worked for the police for five years or less, 72 between six and 20 years, and 42 reported having more than 21 years of experience in the police. A full breakdown of demographic information is available upon request. Post-hoc G*Power was conducted, with results indicating that with $N=209$ participants, 10 predictors, and a 0.05 alpha level, the sample could adequately detect small effect sizes ($f^2 = 0.015$) in multiple linear regressions, as power exceeded 0.99. Post-hoc G*Power analysis is crucial to assessing whether the sample size has adequate statistical power to detect statistically significant effects in regression-based modelling and mediation/moderation analyses, like the ones used in this study. Power exceeding 0.99 means that the study's internal validity is high, suggesting that significant and non-significant effects identified are less likely to be due to chance, thereby supporting the robustness of the conclusions.

Measures

Several scales were included in the online survey. The following section summarises the measures, scale items, and testing criteria. The complete survey is available upon request.

Organisational support and job satisfaction

A validated scale for the analysis of self-reported Teleological, Personalised, Collectivistic, and Monistic Organisational Support, also called the PCMT model, was used (Matusik et al., 2023). As the name implies, it allows for measuring the perceived level of support in the workplace on four dimensions. As its delineation is not specific for a policing context, all 24 scale items were contextualised to accommodate for declinations of organisational support that are more likely to be encountered by police officers. Examples of adapted scale items included: "*The specialist skills I offer are actively sought after by my police force*" or "*My force is interested in me feeling motivated so I can be the best police officer possible*". The participants rated their Adapted-PCMT responses on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), expressing their level of agreement with the statements. None of the

scale items was reversed, so high scores reflect higher levels of perceived organisational support.

An additional scale for overall Job Satisfaction was also added. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure self-reported satisfaction with the mental health support provided, role duties, supervision, and force-specific investments in specialist training, knowledge, and roles. Higher scores are to be interpreted as greater self-reported job satisfaction. This was not a validated scale but an ad hoc addition to the survey. Mean values for the Organisational Support and Job Satisfaction scales were calculated separately.

Role competence

The Self-Liking/Self-Competence Scale (SLCS) validated by Tafarodi and Swann (1995) was used to investigate the participants' Perceived Competence in their roles. In the original version of the scale, individual levels of self-esteem in college students were analysed. The 20 items were adjusted to measure officers' self-reported confidence in their abilities and skills related explicitly to policing-based duties rather than general self-esteem. Adapted items included statements like "*I tend to devalue my role in the police force*" or "*I focus on the strengths I bring to my team*". Surveyed officers were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). In line with the guidance provided by Tafarodi and Swann (1995), half the items (N=10) were reversed items, meaning that high scores in these items specifically indicate low levels of perceived role competence.

Wellbeing and Burnout

The Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) was used to investigate police officers' self-reported wellbeing (University of Warwick, 2006). As this was the only non-open access scale included in the survey, licence registration for non-commercial purposes was sought and approved on the 22nd November 2023. WEMWBS has been validated on UK student and population samples as an effective and reliable measure of positive mental health traits (Tennant et al., 2007). Adjustments were required as the survey questions were too broad (e.g., I feel unwell) and not workplace specific. The adjusted version of the scale captured how officers' mental health is affected by the type of crimes they investigate, their workload, and the support received by colleagues. The modified scale items included "*I have been feeling useful to my force and the public*" and "*I concealed my fatigue, stress or tiredness to not disappoint my team and/or line manager*". Participants indicated how often they experienced the feelings reported in the

statements, specifically at work over the last two weeks. For individuals who were retired, they were asked to think about the last two weeks in service. Frequency responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never; 5 = all the time). Five statements out of 14 scale items were reversed. Two additional binary questions (yes/no) were added to assess whether the participant experienced burnout symptoms and whether these were linked to personal experiences outside of the workplace as a measure of control.

Specialism Endorsement

Lastly, scales were created to measure the overall perception of general and sex offence specialism. This is a construct that was never measured before, and therefore, validated scales were not available. Three separate scales were created:

- A scale on overall Perception of Specialism (9 items), to gather officers' ideas of specialist units and, in general, their level of support for specialism within their police force. Statements included "*Officers investigating in specialist units understand victims' needs better*", "*Setting up specialist units can help improve policing in England and Wales*" or "*The level of training provided to officers joining specialist units is adequate to the job requirements*". The participants indicated their level of agreement with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), with higher scores associated with higher regard for specialism implementation in policing across multiple crimes. One scale item was reversed.
- A scale on Perception of Specialism for sex offences (SO) only (10 items), to examine how and if specialism for this specific crime type is perceived differently by officers from specialism for other crime types (e.g., counterterrorism or cybercrime). This section evaluates how much specialism for SO is valued among officers, what could be improved (if anything), and other related concerns. Statements included "*Police officers should be incentivised to work in specialist units investigating sex offences*", and three reversed items such as "*Sex offences do not need dedicated specialist units and should be investigated with other crimes*". The participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), with higher scores indicating higher SO specialism endorsement.
- A scale on Public Perception of Specialism (7 items) was also added to investigate the officers' ideas of expectations from members of the public around specialist knowledge and units. The scale was inspired by general surveys conducted on members of the public reporting

on their overall experience with the police (Brown, 2021). The items, however, were tailored for the purposes and aims of this study and mainly revolve around specialism. Some of the statements for this scale appeared as "*The public is more likely to trust an officer from a specialist unit*" and "*The work conducted by specialist units is likely to make the public more confident in the police*". Once again, the participants are asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). One reversed item was included.

Due to the nature and complexity of the topic, each survey section gave brief instructions, and a text box after the questions so that participants could add additional insights.

Procedure

Current, former, and retired officers from police forces in England and Wales were invited to take part in an online survey created on *QuestionPro*. Invitations were sent via email and through a social media advert. No remuneration was provided to the participants to participate in the study. The average completion time was 20 minutes. The first section of the study included an Information Sheet showcasing the research details and an Informed Consent form. Data collection was anonymised to incentivise officers' participation. In line with this, no sensitive information (e.g., gender, age) was collected. Identifying characteristics disclosed in the survey (e.g., role, rank, police force) were redacted to protect anonymity. Participants were not required to answer all the questions.

Data analysis

IBM SPSS 29 package for MacBook was used to analyse the survey data. Assumption checking and reliability analysis were performed to identify potential issues with the scale items created and/or adapted. Correlational analyses were then conducted to explore the relationship between the variables, in line with the study hypotheses. For correlated variables, linear and multiple regression analyses were then performed to understand which factors predict higher scores in the scale variables. Indirect contributions were explored through mediation and moderation analyses run on 'PROCESS' for SPSS (Hayes, 2022). Open-ended questions for each scale and section of the survey were used to contextualise the meaning and rationale of officers' answers. Qualitative insights shared as part of the free text responses have been embedded alongside quantitative findings to aid data interpretation. Participants' free-text responses were reviewed inductively to identify insights relevant to

the research questions and to expand on themes identified in previous grounded theory work (*Barbin et al.*, 2025). A descriptive qualitative approach was used, with the authors reviewing all responses to identify examples, shared sentiments, and clarifications for each of the scales used in the survey. Excerpts were selected for their narrative relevance, clarity, and ability to illustrate common or divergent perspectives. Rather than being analysed in isolation (the survey was already coded by topic), open-ended questions aided with the contextualisation and interpretation through the lens of the quantitative findings. The qualitative insights were then integrated as part of the results and combined in the discussion to deepen the understanding of participants' lived experiences of specialism in relation to competence, wellbeing, and organisational support, in ways that quantitative data alone could not capture. This type of integration is supported by Bryman (2006). Convergence and divergence of the mixed-methods input was conducted via a side-by-side comparison of scale item responses and narrative inputs under that specific scale, allowing for a more comprehensive interpretation of officers' perspectives.

Results

Assumptions and scales reliability

The reported values for the variance inflation factor (VIF; <4) and tolerance (>0.25) showed no evidence of multicollinearity, which if present can contribute to misleading regression analysis statistical output. As a result, no adjustments were required. Shapiro-Wilk tests were also performed, with most variables following a normal distribution and no issues of kurtosis, although three (specialism endorsement, SO specialism endorsement, and competence) were slightly skewed from the ±0.50 average, at respectively −0.73, −0.59, and.−54. No corrections were made, however, as skewness values between −1 and 1 are routinely accepted as normally distributed.

After scale items were appropriately reversed, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each scale used in the study to assess internal reliability. Following preliminary testing, the abovementioned *Perception of Specialism* and *Public Perception of Specialism* scales were merged into one, labelled as the Specialism Endorsement Scale. This choice was made as, upon conducting the reliability analysis, several items from both scales showed high convergent validity (Carlson & Herdman, 2012). The number of items for the SO Endorsement Scale ($N = 10$) and Specialism Endorsement Scale ($N = 16$) were reduced to 8 and 11 items respectively, to enhance the quality of the unvalidated scales. Best practice was followed to ensure that only necessary items

were included to improve the scales' validity and reliability. This included, but was not limited to, checking mean-square residuals for every added/removed item, testing dimensionality, and ensuring that reliability was not increased at the cost of validity. Adjustments were implemented only for the non-previously validated scales, as possible redundant items were likely to be present. No other changes were made to the number of items for the other tested measures.

All three adapted scales (PCMT, SLCS, and WEMWBS) retained or improved their original face and content validity, suggesting high levels of reliability were preserved even after they were tailored to a policing context (0.93, 0.84, and 0.87, respectively). For both previously validated and newly created scales, Cronbach's alpha values were within the good reliability range (0.70 −0.81). They were, therefore, highly likely to represent the constructs they intended to measure accurately.

Inferential and correlational analyses

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the scale item scores for current and retired officers with specialism experience to those who never worked for a specialist unit, in line with the first hypothesis that specialism might impact some of the tested variables [RQ1]. For this sample, officers with less than five years of experience in the police were significantly less likely to have worked in a specialist unit ($p < .001$). Similarly, those who accrued more years in the role were significantly more likely to have been employed in a specialist unit (11–15 years and 21–25, $p < .05$; over 26 years, $p < .001$). This means that the percentage of officers with prior experience of specialism differed by years in the role (X^2 (6, $N = 206$) = 65.08, $p < .001$). Another independent-samples t-test was performed to address *RQ2* and identify if police officers who had worked or who were currently working for specialist units were more likely to endorse general and SO specialism. An overview of mean, SD, and significance for all the scale variables is shown in Table 1.

The results suggest that working in specialist units, regardless of the specialist crime investigated, resulted in officers reporting higher levels of satisfaction in their work, feeling more competent about their specialist skills, and having greater wellbeing than officers who never worked for specialist units. Working for a specialist unit was also associated with a greater endorsement of general specialism. The strongest effect was related to self-reported competence, indicating that specialist officers felt significantly more confident than non-specialists in their work-related skills. Correlational analyses were performed to examine further the relationship between the scale variables. Binary variables like retirement status, burnout, and experience of specialism were also added. A summary of the relationship between the variables, including coefficient intervals and significance, is available in Table 2.

Table 2 shows the strength of the relationship between officers' experience of specialism, overall job satisfaction, reported wellbeing, and competence [RQ1]. Results indicated that specialism [Y=0; N=1, this drives the direction of the relationship] was negatively correlated with job satisfaction. This means that working or having worked for a specialist unit was associated with higher self-reported job satisfaction. Officers who worked for specialist units were also significantly more likely to believe that general specialism is needed in policing and endorse it as a result. Overall, it appears that surveyed officers saw specialism and specialisation in a police context in a positive light. In support of this, several of them expanded in their free text responses that investing in specialism development can aid with both victim support and the quality of police investigations:

"Specialist units are required for the police to provide appropriate response to victims involved in certain crimes. Without specialist units, the standard of policing will dramatically decrease to lower than the unacceptable level it is already at" (*Officer 88*).

"Specialist units provide higher quality investigations by recruiting talented officers and reducing workload allowing for a detailed investigation to take place" (*Officer 98*).

Table 1 Differences between officers from specialist and non-specialist units on the scale variables

Scale Variables	Specialist Unit		Non-Specialist Unit					
	M	SD	M	SD	df	t	p	Cohen's d
Competence	3.95	0.60	3.54	0.65	154	3.96	0.000**	0.67
Wellbeing	3.44	0.55	3.23	0.50	149	2.05	0.021*	0.36
Job Satisfaction	2.82	0.70	2.57	0.65	137	2.10	0.019*	0.38
Organisational Support	2.62	0.64	2.43	0.77	143	1.52	0.065	0.27
Sp. Endorsement	3.46	0.47	3.24	0.55	170	2.84	0.003*	0.45
SO Sp. Endorsement	4.04	0.58	3.98	0.45	169	0.82	0.206	0.12

M and SD represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. df corresponds to degrees of freedom; t and p stand for the scale scores t-value and its significance. Lastly, *Cohen's d* is the point estimate: an indication of the effect size for each identified difference. Effects at 0.2 or below are classified as low; around 0.5 as medium and 0.8 or over, is large

Table 2 Correlations, significance, and confidence intervals

Variable	M (SD)	N	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Specialism Endorsement	3.38 (0.51)	172									
2. SO Specialism Endorsement	4.02 (0.54)	171	0.04 [−0.11, 0.19]								
3. Competence	3.81(0.64)	156	0.35** [0.10, 0.48]	0.01 [−0.15, 0.17]							
4. Wellbeing	3.38 (0.54)	151	0.25** [0.10, 0.40]	−0.04 [−0.20, 0.12]	0.68** [0.58, 0.76]						
5. Job Satisfaction	2.73 (0.67)	139	0.36** [0.21, 0.50]	−0.16 [−0.32, −0.01]	0.53** [0.40, 0.64]	0.66** [0.56, 0.75]					
6. Organisational Support	2.56 (0.69)	145	0.49** [0.35, 0.60]	−0.01 [−0.17, 0.15]	0.48** [0.35, 0.60]	0.55** [0.42, 0.65]	0.70** [0.60, 0.78]				
7. Specialist Unit [a]	-	209	−0.21** [−0.35, −0.07]	−0.06 [−0.21, 0.09]	−0.30** [−0.44, −0.15]	−0.17* [−0.32, −0.01]	−0.18* [−0.33, −0.01]	−0.13 [−0.28, 0.04]			
8. Burnout Diagnosis [a]	-	151	0.08 [−0.08., 0.24]	−0.08 [−2.24, 0.08]	0.19* [0.03, 0.34]	0.24** [0.09, 0.39]	0.21* [0.05, 0.36]	0.19* [0.03, 0.34]	0.12 [−0.04, 0.28]		
9. Retired [a]	-	209	0.04 [−0.11, 0.18]	−0.00 [−0.15, 0.15]	−0.20* [−0.34, −0.04]	−0.17* [−0.32, −0.01]	−0.10 [−0.26, 0.06]	−0.02 [−0.18, 0.14]	0.26** [0.13, 0.38]	−0.05 [−0.21, 0.11]	
10. Personal Issues [a]	-	151	0.09 [−0.07, 0.25]	−0.04 [−0.20, 0.12]	0.03 [−0.13, 0.19]	0.01 [−0.15, 0.17]	−0.00 [−0.17, 0.17]	−0.07 [−0.23, 0.10]	−0.07 [−0.23, 0.09]	−0.27** [−0.41, 0.12]	0.10 [−0.06, 0.26]

M and *SD* represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. – is for binary variables that had no *M/SD*. *N* refers to how many participants responded to each variable. All values in [] refer to the 95% confidence interval (CI) for each correlation, as routinely done for studies that tested a single sample from a population (e.g., police officers) as opposed to the entire population. ** indicates $p<.01$, and * indicates $p<.05$ (two-tailed). [a] was used for binary variables for which ($Y=0$, $N=1$), where Y means yes (the attribute is present) and N means no (meaning that the attribute is absent)

This extended beyond specialist units, with some participants praising the commitment of officers deciding to specialise despite the negative organisational contexts under which they are sometimes forced to conduct their specialist work:

"Specialist officers often volunteer for the department they are in. They have committed themselves to endless training/assessment/development and with that comes an element of jealousy from other officers. Most officers on specialist teams see the added value they offer to the organisation and [the] public. They also have more time to concentrate on jobs as due to their role they are often left to investigate rather than local teams who are under immense pressure and resource problems." (*Officer 15*).

This suggests that the success of police specialism cannot be extrapolated from the context in which it develops. The findings stress the importance of organisational climate, funding prioritisation, and managerial support for serving and retired police officers. Despite this, officers were

divided regarding their perception of SO specialism, as opposed to specialism in general. When the relationship between having worked/working for a specialist unit [Y=0] and endorsing SO specialism specifically was considered, no significant correlation between the two variables was observed. The open-ended responses were examined to understand police officers' views of SO specialism endorsement. Different perceptions of specialist SO units compared with units dealing with other crime types emerged:

"In my experience, they are unpopular units [SO], usually with teams that are too small with high workloads. This applies to specialist teams and those that investigate SO amongst other PIP2 matters. As such, an incentive may help to improve retention and assist the national detective shortage" (*Officer 96*).

Correlations with the remaining variables (wellbeing and burnout) were explored, as international and national research publications informally associated specialism with hindered wellbeing in policing (Maguire & Sondhi, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2024; Vuorensyrjä & Mälkiä, 2011). This

study found no significant correlation between working for a specialist unit (any crime) and having received a burnout diagnosis. This means that a linear relationship between specialism and burnout could not be identified, suggesting that higher burnout could be linked to crime type, exposure, and organisational climate as flagged in several papers that included specialist officers, as opposed to being linked to specialism per se (Duran et al., 2019; Tsirimokou et al., 2024). Interestingly, some police officers argued that some specialist units have more measures in place than non-specialist units to look after officers' mental health, with better support around burnout prevention:

"Some specialist units [that] have specific protocols in place due to the traumatic nature of the role, these can somewhat ameliorate the issues caused" (*Officer 80*).

As seen in Table 2, the correlation between self-reported competence, job satisfaction, and perceived organisational support stresses that contextual and support-related organisational dynamics might be critical in preserving officers' wellbeing in specialist and non-specialist roles. For instance, the length of time spent on cases outside of regular working hours and a lack of support worsened *Officer 65's* wellbeing:

"The role I was given is impossible to do as one person. I have told them time and time again and I just got shoulder shrugged. I ended up working an hour or so extra most days to make things work. They didn't care. I was feeling close to burnout. Six months later they're on my case massively about my hours but being so severe about it saying it's for my welfare but actually not listening to me saying that I need help. I now can't do my role, and the micromanaging is causing me more stress and frustration. It's an awful situation to be in. It makes me feel devalued and demotivated.".

In line with this, greater perceived organisational support was positively correlated with higher scores for general specialism endorsement, self-reported competence, wellbeing, and overall job satisfaction. This means that creating opportunities for specialist and non-specialist officers to maximise their skills in a context that value and protects officers' competence might assist them with maintaining better overall wellbeing in the long term. For officers who highly endorsed specialism, this correlation was even higher, suggesting that specialism might positively affect officers' perception of competence and job satisfaction extending beyond wellbeing benefits. The effectiveness of specialism, as well as its development in policing, were mentioned within the context of elitist attitudes:

"Specialism is needed. Extra training is needed for teams that investigate sexual offences for example with child images or vulnerable victims. There's elitism in some units such as firearms but that's more of some individual personalities rather than whole units. There will always be those who feel elite or act in that way. A lot depends on [the] culture of forces or units" (*Officer 65*).

"Specialising is important, just like in medicine if I [were] having brain surgery, I would want it done by a brain surgeon and not a GP. However, the negative side of specialism is that cultures develop where specialists feel they are better than others and specialist units have become hotbeds for unethical behaviour. There is also a hierarchy of specialisms, which I think is more about the 'sexiness' of the roles rather than the seriousness of the offences being investigated. For example, working in a serious organised crime unit is seen as more desirable than working in a Domestic Abuse or Rape unit, even though, often, the most serious offenders are the same people" (*Officer 56*).

Keeping these concepts in mind, the following steps of the analysis looked at the interactive dynamic between the tested variables in a way that goes beyond the linear relationships measured via correlation to understand if and how specialism might be beneficial in practice for police officers.

Predictors and moderation-mediation analysis

Standard multivariate regressions were performed to explore significant predictors, mediators, and moderators amongst the scale and binomial variables.

The influence of organisational support, self-reported competence, specialism, and job satisfaction (IVs) on predicted officers' wellbeing (DV) was measured through a standard linear regression [*RQ4*]. The model's fit was significant, suggesting that at least one of the independent variables tested affects wellbeing. Overall, the model explains 59% of the variance in wellbeing scores. A summary of the regression analysis is shown in Table 3. Upon inspecting each variable, both greater overall job satisfaction (*relationship 1*) and higher self-reported competence (*relationship 2*) significantly predicted better wellbeing among the surveyed police officers. Although no significant direct influence of organisational support and specialism was found, both these variables actively contributed to the overall significance of the model, as tested via stepwise regression, and were retained for additional analysis.

Multiple mediation and moderation analyses were then conducted to explore if organisational support and

Table 3 Multiple regression, coefficients, and variance explained by the wellbeing model

Wellbeing	Coeff. (β)	Std. Err.	t-value	p-value	Sig.
Organisational Support	0.059	0.062	0.75	0.45	
Competence	0.463	0.058	6.75	0.00	***
Job Satisfaction	0.386	0.066	4.74	0.00	***
Specialism	0.051	0.065	0.88	0.38	
Constant	0.898	0.200	4.48	0.00	***
Mean (DV)	3.378		SD	0.543	
R^2	0.594		(DV)	137	
F-test	48.687		Obs. (N)	0.000	
			Prob >F		

*** $p < .001$

specialism – intended as working for a specialist unit – had an indirect or moderating effect on self-reported wellbeing (Table 4).

A first mediation analysis was run to test the influence of job satisfaction (*M*) as a mediator between organisational support (X) and self-reported wellbeing (Y) [PROCESS, Model 4]. For moderation to happen, a significant indirect effect of X on Y via the mediator needs to be observed. The relationship between organisational support and the mediator was significant (*relationship 3, a* =.68, 95% CI [.57,.80], *p*<.001), indicating that better organisational contexts can directly impact police officers' levels of satisfaction in the workplace [*RQ3*]. The direct effect of job satisfaction on wellbeing was significant, (*relationship 4, b* =.46, 95% CI [.32,.60], *p*<.001). The direct effect of organisational support on wellbeing was not observed (*c* =.10, 95% CI [-.04,.24], *p*=.156), suggesting mediation via job satisfaction (M) might be occurring. In line with this, the indirect effect of

X on Y was tested (X*Y) and was found to be significant, as the bootstrap CI did not include zero (*relationship 5, c'* = 0.31, 95% CI [0.21, 0.41]). A critical ratio *Sobel test* was conducted to assess that the indirect effect of organisational support on wellbeing via the mediator (job satisfaction) significantly differed from zero. As the resulting z score was equal to 5.68 (>1.96), it was concluded that the registered effect of organisational support on wellbeing is significant, and not due to chance (R^2=0.491, *F*(1,136)=130.96, *p*<.001). There was no interaction effect of burnout (β = −0.39, 95% CI [−0.88, 0.09], *p*=.11) or personal issues (β=0.18, 95% CI [−0.03, 0.38], *p*=.09) on moderating the relationship between competence and wellbeing, suggesting competence might be a protective factor.

These interactions were captured in the open-ended questions, with several officers articulating how organisational climate influenced how they perceived their role in the force and shaped internal dynamics with high-ranking officers:

"organisational and bureaucratic challenges were the things that made [officers] question the worth of [their] role [and] seemingly pointless roadblocks or outright malicious actions from more senior officers detracted from the focus of the team" (*Officer 05*).

Interestingly, the adverse effects registered were not limited to personal wellbeing but extended to officers' perception of their knowledge and confidence in their role. For instance, *Officer 17* voiced how frustrating engagements with the organisation were problematic despite an overall acknowledgement of adequate competence achieved to perform day-to-day policing duties:

Table 4 Summary of moderation-mediation analyses

		Consequent M (Job Satisfaction)				Y (Wellbeing)		
(1) Simple Mediation		Coeff.	SE	p		Coeff	SE	p
X (Organisational Support)	a	0.685	0.060	< .001	c'	0.100	0.070	.156
M (Job Satisfaction)		-	-	-	b	0.458	0.072	< .001
Constant	i_M	0.978	0.159	< .001	i_Y	1.875	0.150	< .001
		R^2 = .491				R^2 = .448		
		F (1, 136) = 130.96, p < .001				F (2, 135) = 54.71, p < .001		
						Sig. Ind. effect CI 95% [.206, .415]		
(2) Moderation Model Summary						Coeff	SE	t	p
R^2 = .454, F (3, 152) = 13.18, p < .001								
Constant						2.055	0.415	4.953	< .001
Specialism (X)						1.171	0.622	1.882	.062
General Specialism Endorsement (W)						0.551	0.119	4.618	< .001
Interaction						-.453	0.185	-2.443	.016
X x W R^2 = .031, F (1, 152) = 5.97, p < .05								
Conditional Effects of Specialism Endorsement (W) on Competence (Y)								
Value	Effect	SE	t	p	CI 95%	LLCI	ULCI	
2.909	-.146	.125	-1.172	.243		-.393	.100	
3.455	-.393	.103	-3.802	< .001		-.597	-.189	
3.890	-.590	.147	-4.030	< .001		-.880	-.301	

"I am very competent and a well-rounded officer and human. I however face challenges in that my bosses want certain results, but they aren't willing to sign off on what is necessary to get them. I am mostly frustrated at their inability to listen and make decisions. I am a subject matter expert and one of the best in the force however when decisions get made by those above, they are fairly clueless at the actual workings of things on the ground, but it is they who are 'explaining' things to ACC [Assistant Chief Constable] level. The chain of command thing is frustrating as it should bypass the middle ranks and just be direct to me so I can say it how it is. It is an inherent problem in most forces where top bosses […] make decisions that they don't realise will affect those below because they are so far removed".

In this sense, officers from both specialist and non-specialist teams suggest a disconnect between officers responding to crimes and/or leading investigations, who actively attend crime scenes and investigations, and higher-ranking officers within the force, who hold managerial roles. They also attribute this disconnect and organisational climate to concerns around performance and staff retention:

"The view of individual officers on their performance, professional value, and efficacy is, will be, and always has been clouded by organisational inefficiency and supervisory lacking. I was a supervisory rank, an experienced intelligence officer and [an] extremely experienced patrol officer; I loved my job and was exceptional at it. There is, however, a distinct lack of supervisory and strategic competence within the service, and individual officers will often be found to be in one of two camps; indelibly self-aware of minute failings, and as such lacking in confidence, or alternatively, they will be blind to criticism and in their eyes, unassailable in their role. It is uncommon to find an officer in the clear middle ground" (*Officer 55*).

Having established that the surveyed officers did not perceive specialism as an obstacle to career development and mental health in the workplace, further analysis was performed. As specialism was correlated with both self-reported competence (X) and wellbeing (Y), moderation analysis [PROCESS, Model 1] was conducted to test if a group effect was registered. While the effect of X on Y was significant (*relationship 6*, β=0.66, 95% CI [0.53, 0.79], $p<.001$), the interaction of specialism was not significant (β = −0.21, 95% CI [−0.43, −0.01], $p=.06$), and the relationship was, therefore, not added to the model. This means that although group differences were registered (e.g., specialists

had better self-reported competence and scored higher on the wellbeing scale), no direct moderation effect of specialism on wellbeing occurred for this sample, so its effect as a predictor was subsequently tested.

The dynamic between specialism (X, predictor), general specialism endorsement (W, moderator), and self-reported competence (Y, dependent) was also explored via moderation analysis [PROCESS, Model 1]. The model was significant, ($R^2=0.206$, $F(3,150)=43.97$, $p<.001$), with 20.57% of the variance in competence explained by the variables, suggesting that other non-tested factors can contribute to increased self-reported competence in the workplace. The interaction of specialism endorsement on the relationship was also significant, (*relationship 7*, β = −0.45, 95% CI [−0.82, −0.09], $p<.05$), indicating that for specialist officers (Y=0), highly endorsing specialism moderated higher scores of self-reported competence. The moderator adds 3.01% to the variance, bringing it to a total of 23.61%. The direction of the relationship (-) indicates that the strength of the relationship mathematically increases as the scale value for the moderator (W) increases. As shown in Table 4, at low moderation the effect was not significant, while the medium and high moderation were both significant. This suggests that medium-to-high endorsements of specialism increased self-reported competence scores in officers employed in specialist units, while low specialism endorsement reduced the interaction between specialism and perceived competence. In this sense, having a prior positive experience of specialism, and believing that general specialism (not crime-specific) is useful in a policing context, led to higher scores on the competence scale. An overview of the final interaction model of police specialism is shown in Fig. 1.

Discussion

The study aimed to quantitatively identify, for the first time, the impact of police specialism and its endorsement within a dynamic organisational policing context. The inductive data collection gathered insights directly from police officers on what they believe is working in their police force, and what needs to be improved. Participants included current, former, and retired officers across 43 police forces in England and Wales. The choice of opening the survey to all police forces, as opposed to focusing on one, not only helped capture force-specific dynamics but also allowed a broader understanding of police realities and concerns. Although the sample is not representative of the perspective of *all* officers in England and Wales, there are strong grounds to assume that the study's findings can be generalised across the 43 national police forces more easily than studies focusing solely on one, or at least fewer, police forces.
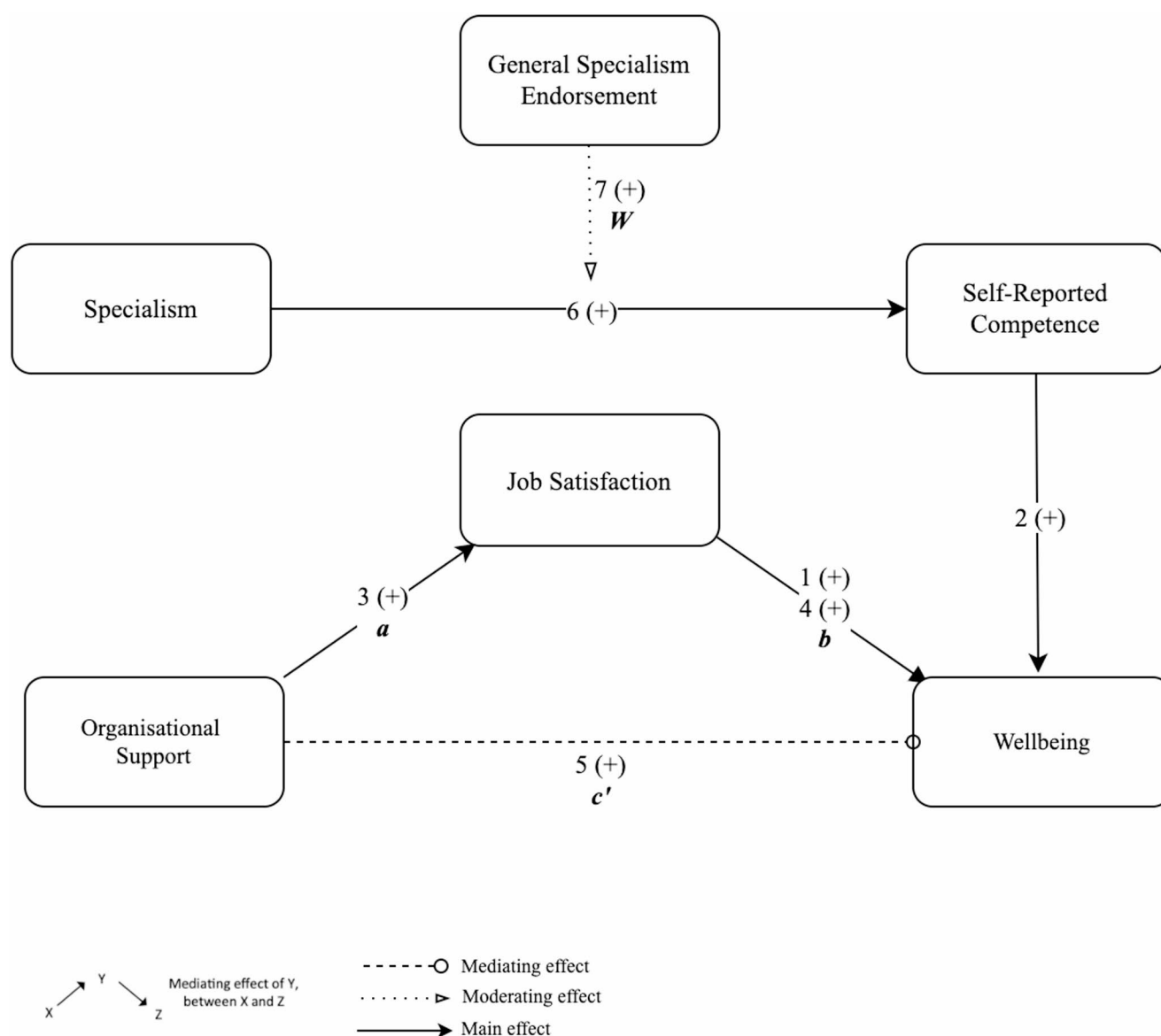
Fig. 1 Interaction model highlights the main, moderating and mediating effects of specialism, general specialism endorsement, organisational support, and job satisfaction on competence and wellbeing. The model and the figure were created by the authors.

Relying on concepts like that of *actual performance* (Hibberd, 2021) and inspired by the DRIVE model applied to a policing setting (Oliver et al., 2022), the influence of specialism on competence and wellbeing was investigated. Correlational analyses showed that working for a specialist unit led to higher scores on all validated and non-validated scale items [RQ1]. Prior experience of specialism was also associated with significantly higher scores in self-reported competence, general specialism endorsement [RQ2], job satisfaction, and wellbeing, compared to those who never worked for a specialist unit. The results show that specialism has a positive influence on individual perceptions, and officers' contextualisation of their responses to the open-ended questions also supports this. Overall, the

findings suggest that acquiring specialist skills or working for specialist units is making police officers more confident in their abilities, more satisfied with their role and reporting better wellbeing, although not in a causative relationship. This direct measure was never explicitly captured before, either within or outside England and Wales. Both qualitative and quantitative data showed substantially consistent and coherent patterns of how supportive officers felt of improving specialism delineation and guidance for more effective policing practices, better organisational support, and competence. Despite this, participants gave varied responses when being asked about general specialism endorsement (e.g., non-crime-specific) and specialism for sex offences. For instance, officers appeared less likely to

endorse SO specialism, with no difference observed across specialist and non-specialist officers. By solely looking at the quantitative data, it appeared that SO specialism is perhaps perceived as less beneficial than general specialism. However, the open-ended responses allowed for a more nuanced understanding of officers' answers within the context of England and Wales policing, where the effectiveness of the police in deterring and convicting sex offenders has been subjected to debates and widespread criticism. Overall, the lack of nationally enforced specialist units for SO, compared with national guidance for other specialist units, has not allowed police officers to experience SO specialism as organically and as positively as reported for other crime types. The integration of the study's qualitative and quantitative insights pinpointed that while the principle of specialism for sex offending is endorsed in writing, additional layers of complexity and inherent characteristics of sex offence investigations position SO specialism (currently underdeveloped) in a distinct and more problematic conceptual space that would benefit from further investigation.

When specialism was included in the model as a moderator for wellbeing scores, no direct effects were found. When specialism was added as a predictor, it was associated with higher self-reported competence scores in police officers who moderately and highly endorsed it. This means that specialism could be an important tool to increase police officers' competence in their role, even more so if prior positive experience of specialisation was registered. This finding is important and has been overlooked in policing contexts, with forces frequently described as overly focused on performance rather than providing specialist experience and training (Wiggett, 2024). Another recurrent theme was the influence of organisational support. Police officers from specialist and non-specialist units appeared substantially dissatisfied with the organisational support received. The overall organisational support scores for both groups were very low [close to 2, on a scale ranging from 1 to 5], indicating that a negative overall perception of organisational dynamics is widespread in policing and transcends specialism implementation. This aligns with evidence highlighting a need to address systemic failures in policing by eliciting systemic change (Casey, 2023).

When considered outside of the group dynamic (specialist versus non-specialists), organisational support had an indirect effect on wellbeing, via job satisfaction [RQ3]. Understanding how organisational support affects wellbeing in England and Wales is vital as substantial evidence from international publications has indicated that poor organisational support is associated with higher psychological strain among police officers (Biggs et al., 2014), lower role capacity and effectiveness (Boateng, 2014), and greater emotional exhaustion – especially when linked to poor career

progression opportunities (Setti & Argentero, 2013). A systematic review of the impact of organisational stressors in a policing context has also shown the influence of poor managerial support on higher levels of emotional exhaustion, lower personal accomplishment, and significantly hindered wellbeing (Purba & Demou, 2019).

Regression and moderation analyses were conducted to investigate organisational and wellbeing dynamics more specifically for this sample. The multiple linear regression analysis highlighted the significant role of police officers' confidence in their role and overall job satisfaction in improving and determining wellbeing scores in the workplace [RQ4]. The findings need to be read in line with Margrove and Smith (2022), who hypothesised that in a policing context, work and individual factors develop within a multi-dimensional and multi-dynamic model where the perceptions of stressors in the workplace act as mediators of the relationship between organisational pressures (e.g., work demand, caseloads, performance) and more positive or negative wellbeing outcomes (e.g., anxiety, depression). In this sense, the study did not try to look for linear, direct, and causative effects, but rather, to explore in which ways variables like specialism, organisational support, and job satisfaction – to mention a few – can affect each other directly and indirectly. As reiterated by Oliver et al. (2022), stressful work contexts only affect wellbeing if the individual perceives their environment as such. While factors like individual resiliency were not tested in this study, the direct main effect of self-reported competence on wellbeing suggests that investing in specialist skills development for police officers – in a way that is aimed at making them more confident in their abilities – could be an important protective factor for wellbeing amid challenging day-to-day policing circumstances. As a main effect of competence on wellbeing was registered in the model, investing in specialist skills, units, and roles should be a crucial step for any police force looking to preserve and improve their officers' wellbeing. This may be even more relevant for crimes like sex offences committed against both adults and children, where higher levels of burnout among officers have been reported (Maguire & Sondhi, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2024). Considering the study's findings, it is possible to hypothesise that the high burnout in specialist officers is not directly associated with or attributed to specialism. Agreeing, officers referred to specialism as a protective factor, *especially* for crime types that have a traumatic component to the investigation.

Hindered wellbeing in police officers is therefore more likely linked to organisational factors, lack of support, as well as inherent characteristics of the crimes investigated and the length of the exposure to the crime type itself (Mitchell et al., 2024). Officers working in hostile organisational climates – where specialist skills are not prioritised or valued and

high-ranking officers appear disconnected and disinterested in what is best for their officers – showed decreased levels of wellbeing, independently of them working for a specialist unit. Exemplifying this, several officers made direct connections between challenges encountered in the workplace and adverse effects on self-esteem, competence in the role, and wellbeing. The detrimental effects of a negative climate extend to the overall performance and focus of the team/force. The influence of organisational dynamics on officers' mental health and wellbeing was also underlined by Duran et al. (2019). In support of this, evidence published by Correia et al. (2023) showed that perceiving the organisation as fair (organisational justice), positively identifying with it (role identity), and having work recognised as meaningful (job satisfaction) were all significant protective factors for burnout in a policing context. Although measured via different constructs, this study also highlighted a positive significant main effect of job satisfaction and an indirect mediating effect of organisational support on wellbeing. Overall, the interaction between competence, organisational support, and wellbeing is crucial for the police officers sampled, who perceive a discrepancy or a misalignment between their potential in the role and challenges related to the broader organisation. When thinking about how police specialism and organisational climate should improve, some of the surveyed officers mentioned that high-ranking police officers should pay more attention to their officers' needs and workload, although stressing that not many leaders have shown the capacity to implement this.

In a time characterised by increased media and public scrutiny on police work, surveyed police officers also stressed the need to hold investigative and practical specialist standards in a way that is positively reflected and reinforced by skill recognition, career advancement, work support, and financial incentives. The study's findings provided a first overview of how many of these variables are connected, depicting a positive potential influence of maximised specialist investments on job satisfaction, competence, and wellbeing, which are all critical factors that might contribute to higher staff retainment and that are presently being overlooked by many government frameworks, reviews, and guidance. The study also suggests that surveyed officers would like to see better support from high-ranking officers, a more supportive organisational climate, and greater investment in specialism as directly linked with their ability to focus on their caseloads and deliver expected force-specific outcomes. The moderation model presented could be a first step towards prioritising adequate specialist investments in light of their potential benefits for officers' wellbeing and performance, even more so for crimes that pose an increased risk of burnout (e.g., child abuse, sex offences, etc.). We argue that policymakers should consider

these findings while drafting future models of change in policing.

Theoretically, the findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of wellbeing in policing by reinforcing the value of multi-dimensional models that incorporate both individual and organisational factors (Margrove & Smith, 2022; Oliver et al., 2022). The application of the DRIVE model in this context illustrated how officers' perceptions and lived experience of specialism can influence competence and job satisfaction, ultimately protecting or hindering wellbeing. The distinction drawn between general and sex offences specialism also opened new opportunities for research into how specialism is internalised depending on organisational structures, crime type, workforce climate, and specialism support. This reinforces the need for context-sensitive and individual-informed approaches to modelling and understanding the effects of specialism within constabularies. Furthermore, the study challenged the assumption that stressors uniformly affect all officers, suggesting that individual perceptions and prior experience with specialist roles significantly mediate these effects.

Practically, these insights underscore the need to reassess how police forces conceptualise professional development, specialist roles and units, as well as organisational wellbeing. The positive association between specialism and both self-reported competence and wellbeing highlights the potential long-term value of embedding specialist experience into officers' career trajectories. Additionally, the findings draw attention to the crucial role policing organisations have in facilitating systemic change informed by officers' needs for better clarified specialist pathways. These are not isolated concerns but recurring themes that appear to transcend role type or crime area, underscoring the need for structural as well as cultural change in policing environments.

Recommendations

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for policing policy, training, and organisational development. Firstly, police forces should prioritise investment in clearly defined specialist career pathways and units, given the positive associations between specialism and perceived competence, job satisfaction, and wellbeing (Oliver et al., 2022; Wiggett, 2024). Formal recognition of specialist skills could enhance morale and validate officers' contributions, particularly in demanding contexts such as the investigation of sex offences, where burnout appears to be more prevalent (Maguire & Sondhi, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2024). The consistently low organisational support scores reported by specialist and non-specialist officers highlight a need for cultural reform and strengthened leadership practices

(Casey, 2023). Officers should be equipped with specialist skills in contexts of supportive, trauma-informed supervision, and team-centred organisational approaches (Duran et al., 2019). Wellbeing interventions must be tailored to the unique demands of specialist roles, with targeted support systems that include debriefs, mental health provision, and peer support (Setti & Argentero, 2013). Performance measures could also be revised to integrate individual factors such as competence and job satisfaction, both of which were found to significantly influence wellbeing in this study (Biggs et al., 2014; Boateng, 2014; Purba & Demou, 2019). These measures have the potential to better reflect officers' needs and challenges, helping pre-empt occupational stress and disengagement within constabularies (Margrove & Smith, 2022). At a national level, policing bodies and policymakers should consider the psychological and operational benefits of clearly outlined and prioritised specialist roles when drafting future strategies, shifting away from performance-driven models towards a more supportive and sustainable vision for police work and success (Correia et al., 2023). Finally, the findings make space for long-term workforce planning through a more strategic distribution and development of specialist units across forces, recognising their potential to improve retention, reduce burnout, and support public safety outcomes, as these aspects currently appear underdeveloped.

Limitations and future research

Contemporary policing performance measures and top-down approaches lack contextual and practical consistency (Brown, 2021). While this study did not try to measure performance, it shed some light on the internal measures that the police officers sampled perceived as relevant for success, and that might help them improve personal efficacy in their roles. This was also the first attempt at measuring specialism in practice, and while more research and testing are needed to refine the scales, a thorough approach was taken to quantify, where possible, contributing factors from which police officers might benefit. The topic is undoubtedly complex, and while the research did not try to simplify interconnected policing dynamics, it bears the limitations of a predominantly quantitative study. For instance, findings extrapolated from this sample of police officers might not accurately represent the feelings and experiences of all police officers in England and Wales. Generalisations and data interpretations have been conducted with this limitation in mind. To avoid having a purely statistically driven output, open-ended questions were added for each of the scale variables. This also allowed police officers to contextualise their responses to the questionnaire. Similarly,

while the regression and the moderation models collectively explain more than half the variance for the surveyed police officers, it is important to note that this does not prove causation, as additional individual, contextual, organisational, and circumstantial factors that were not measured in this study are likely to affect officers' wellbeing, competence, and job satisfaction. Every precaution (e.g., assumption checking, power analysis, and scatterplot examinations) was put in place to ensure the integrity of the analysis and minimise errors. The study adds a novel understanding, previously inferred, on the potential usefulness and effectiveness of specialism in a policing context – informed by the lived experiences of current, retired, and former police officers. The findings served as a baseline for the development of the first theoretical framework of police specialism effectiveness, pre-empting the co-creation of tailored guidance on how specialism and specialist skills development could be maximised according to police officers in England and Wales.

Conclusion

The study quantitatively measured, for the first time, the impact of specialism and specialism endorsement in policing, relating to job satisfaction, organisational support, competence, and wellbeing. Overall, the significant differences highlighted between specialist and non-specialist officers indicate that specialism can have a positive effect on officers' confidence in their ability and be an indirect protective factor for wellbeing in policing. Moreover, the perceived level of organisational support indirectly mediated wellbeing scores via job satisfaction. The findings reiterated the dynamic nature of policing and the importance of considering police officers' needs and perspectives for implementing change.

Declarations

Ethics approval The University of Suffolk PGR ethics committee revised and approved the study on the 18th of December 2023 [RETH(P)22/009_23/013]. The study was conducted in line with approved ethical standards of the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki, and subsequent amendments.

Informed consent The participants were presented with an information sheet and consent form prior to study completion. In line with privacy and anonymity rights, no identifying information was collected (e.g., name, age, police force, gender, IP address or email). When identifying information was disclosed, the text was redacted. Upon agreeing to take part in the study, the participants also consented that the redacted version of their answers could be used for conference presentations, reports and publication in journal articles.

Conflict of interest The authors declare no personal, commercial or financial conflicts of interest.

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