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'It's an absolute shambles': police officers' views on institutional challenges in policing rape and serious sex offences in England and Wales

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ABSTRACT

Recent reviews and research into the efficacy of rape and serious sex offence investigations have found myriad institutional issues in policing that require urgent improvement. To explore this area further, 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with police officers across four forces in England and Wales. The interview data were qualitatively analysed using thematic analysis. Three main themes were identified related to institutional challenges: (1) staffing, including lack of resources and high workloads, inexperienced staff, and supervision issues; (2) training, including a lack of specialist training, and inadequate systems training; and (3) technology, including lack of access to equipment/systems, and systems not being user-friendly. Of note in the findings is the complex interconnected nature of these challenges, and the consequences of this in terms of the need for broader, systemic change, rather than tackling each factor in isolation. The article discusses how institutional change will only be facilitated through a frank acceptance of the current issues seen within rape and serious sex offence (RASSO) policing and a concerted effort to enact change that values planning and reflection, as well as the allowance for collaborative and meaningful evaluation of such change. Drawing on insights from organisational attention theory, it also considered how competing organisational demands and resource constraints may shape which reform priorities receive sustained institutional focus.

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Introduction

Rape and serious sex offences (RASSO) continue to present policing with extensive challenges, from whether the police service is seen as a trustworthy institution that victims want to report to, to being able to build cases that lead to outcomes that satisfy victims and the public, to high attrition rates, and everything else in between (Harding et al., 2024). Despite extensive national reviews over decades, there has been little significant improvement (e.g. Home Office, 2000, His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate [HMCPSI] 2007, Stern, 2010, His Majesty's [HM] Government, 2021, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies, Fire and Rescue Services [HMICFRS] and HMCPSI, 2022, Law Commission 2023). As Jordon said nearly 15 years ago, 'reviews come, reviews go, and women are still raped' (2011, p. 245).

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One possible explanation for this lack of tangible improvement lies in how organisational priorities are established and maintained within policing institutions. Organisational attention theory suggests that organisational behaviour is shaped not only by the problems that exist within an organisation, but by the issues that decision-makers and practitioners are able to prioritise within environments characterised by competing demands and limited cognitive and organisational capacity (Ocasio, 1997, Ocasio, 2011). In complex organisations such as policing, attention is structured through mechanisms such as workload allocation, supervisory practices, training systems, and information infrastructures, which influence which problems receive sustained organisational focus and which struggle to gain traction (Ocasio, 1997, Ocasio and Joseph 2005). This perspective provides a useful conceptual lens through which to consider why longstanding problems in the investigation of rape may persist despite repeated reviews and reform initiatives.

While much research has documented the contributions of officers' attitudes and behaviours towards sex offence cases and the victims and suspects they involve, as well as the characteristics of the cases themselves, little attention has been paid to the institutional challenges that police officers face when investigating RASSO (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2023). This is the focus of this paper. Below we give an overview of the main institutional – sometimes referred to as 'organisational' – challenges that have been identified in this area by previous research, including factors such as inadequate training, resources, supervision, systems, welfare, and technological issues (e.g. George and Ferguson, 2021, HMICFRS, 2021, Hohl and Stanko, 2025). Considering such challenges, it has been argued that there is not adequate infrastructure within policing 'to effectively support officers and furnish them with the appropriate tools and support to conduct a rape investigation' (Brown and Fleming, 2024, p. 148).

Resourcing is perhaps the most extensively studied institutional challenge, viewed in the wider context of a global police staffing crisis (Wilson and Miles-Johnson, 2024). In England and Wales, under-resourcing has been attributed to the effects of government-imposed austerity measures following the financial crisis of 2008/9, leading to a 'national crisis' in the shortage of police investigators (Harding et al., 2024). Home Office statistics from England and Wales show that the number of police officers employed decreased from 172,000 in 2010 to 150,000 officers in 2018, a fall of nearly 13% (Home Office, 2023). In addition to austerity measures, police under-resourcing may also be linked to legitimacy crises, demographic and generational shifts, changing workloads and performance expectations, reallocation of budgets, competing demands, management challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic, the police reform movement, and other systemic and acute circumstances (Wilson and Miles-Johnson, 2024). These 'very real resource constraints' may lead to police 'enforcing no more than a fraction of rape crimes' (Hohl and Stanko, 2025, p. 18).

Research has cited the 'profound effect' of under-resourcing, noting its impacts on different stages of RASSO investigations, including response, investigation, and prosecution (Walley et al., 2025). For example, a lack of resources, coupled with increased reporting, may negatively impact the progression of cases and outcomes, joint working with other agencies such as the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) (George and Ferguson, 2021), victims' experiences and confidence in the police (HM Government 2021), and officer wellbeing (HMICFRS, 2021). Attempts to address police understaffing, however, usually take piecemeal approaches to allocation, recruitment, training, and retention, ignoring wider systematic issues such as prioritising workload demand and performance objectives (Wilson and Weiss, 2014).

There is an inextricable link between resourcing and workloads, where under-staffed RASSO teams leave individual officers carrying 'unmanageable workloads', without the time to investigate cases to the best of their ability (HMICFRS, 2021). The Casey Review (2023) found that in the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), workloads were 'unrelenting', with officers having to frequently work on weekends and rest days to keep up with demand. Excessive workloads may have numerous consequences for investigations, officers, and victims. For example, heavy caseloads may mean that officers are under pressure to close cases as quickly as possible, and may prioritise cases which have a higher likelihood of a charge and conviction (Casey, 2023), sticking to 'the bare minimum

(or less)' on cases that fall outside of this or where there is no 'live danger' (Hohl and Stanko, 2025). As noted by Brown and Fleming (2024), this 'huge lack of capacity in the face of increasing demand' means that if the case is not 'acute', then it may not be fully investigated for months. This may then significantly impact victim experiences (Harding et al., 2024), making investigations slow to progress and communication poor, leaving victims feeling 'disappointed' and 'unsafe', with their lives in limbo (HMICFRS, 2021). In turn, this may contribute to high victim attrition, with the London Rape Review (Mayor of London, 2019) finding that victim withdrawal is the most common form of attrition (58% in a sample of classified cases). Excessive workloads may also affect officers themselves, leading to poor work-life balance, emotional exhaustion, and high levels of burnout amongst RASSO investigators (Sondhi et al., 2023).

In the face of such challenges relating to the stress and burnout associated with high workloads, it is hardly surprising that there is a high staff turnover on RASSO teams (Nonis et al., 2024), where retention has been highlighted as a major issue. In focus groups with police officers, George and Ferguson (2021) found that forces were losing staff on 'what seemed like a monthly basis', with officers describing how staff were exhausted from their workloads, choosing to move department, or forced into other roles. These posts were then frequently either left vacant or filled by 'moving staff', who did not necessarily want to be on RASSO teams, resulting in unmotivated officers. Officers feeling unappreciated or undervalued have also been identified as a factor in poor retention, with Scheer et al.'s (2024) survey of 600 United States (US) officers finding that organisational characteristics and leadership play a strong part in retaining staff, who need to feel valued.

With staff leaving already under-resourced teams, management must recruit more officers; however, recruitment has been found to be problematic for various reasons. Issues related to recruitment include, but are not limited to, uniformed officers being reluctant to apply for detective roles, given unattractive shift patterns, dealing with high-risk cases, financial disincentives (HMICFRS, 2021), negative media coverage, and low public trust in police officers (Roman and McGough, 2024). There have been various initiatives in England and Wales which seek to address the dire shortfall of officers, including the 'Uplift' programme, which recruited 46,504 new officers between 2019–2023 (Home Office, 2024a). However, Casey (2023) observed that such programmes have led to recruitment drives which are solely financially led, with 'no plan for the workforce beyond bringing people in' (p.105). Furthermore, it has been noted that the number of officers recruited is still far smaller than the numbers who have left, and that new recruits are often younger and less experienced (Institute for Government, 2023, Police Federation, 2024), which may mean that they are less likely to feed into specialist rape units (Brown and Fleming, 2024). As observed by Walley et al. (2025):

> The issue of capacity is not solely about the number of officers, but how many appropriate officers there are to handle cases. This, in practice, involves having enough officers who hold the requisite experience and are suitably trained to undertake the role. (p.3)

The institutional challenges of lack of capacity, heavy workloads, and poor recruitment and retention on RASSO teams are therefore compounded by the challenge of having an inexperienced workforce, which is frequently young in service, often without investigative backgrounds and expertise (George and Ferguson, 2021), and thus unable to be as effective (Casey, 2023). Officers have reported a reduction in experienced staff on RASSO teams, and an increase in inexperienced officers who may be straight out of probation periods and have not yet developed the skills required to conduct rape investigations, which inevitably negatively affects investigative outcomes (George and Ferguson, 2021). This may also directly impact victims, with inexperienced officers in Murphy-Oikonen et al. (2023) describing being 'thrown into the fire' when dealing with complaints and victims of sexual assault. George and Ferguson (2021) set out how the issues discussed thus far may affect cases and victims:

> Potential drivers of decreased referrals and charges … [include] factors … such as reduced resources, a national shortage of detectives, greater staff turnover, higher workloads as the number of rapes reported to police

> increased, and increased use of less experienced staff … As well as reducing the likelihood of cases progressing, this all has a knock-on effect on victims' experience of the process and their overall confidence in the system (p. 37).

Officers being 'appropriate' to the role of investigating rape – the term used by Walley et al. (2025) – includes not only having experience but also being adequately trained. However, research has highlighted how training is frequently absent or insufficient to prepare officers, which may be partly attributed to ongoing budget cuts, with training being seen as an easy way to reduce costs (George and Ferguson, 2021). In over a quarter of case files reviewed by HMICFRS (2021), officers did not have the correct training; due to demand and resource issues, this may mean that investigations are being led by untrained detectives. RASSO investigators are meant to complete the Specialist Sexual Assault Investigators Development Programme (SSAIDP) in preparation for their role (College of Policing, 2024). However, the inspection found that there were differences between forces in their uptake for SSAIDP, with most officers having not completed the programme. This was supported by Williams et al. (2022), who found that few RASSO officers had completed SSAIDP and were placed on RASSO teams without it.

Compounding the issue of a lack of training is the evidence that training programmes in England and Wales are limited in scope and lack the use of evidence-based practices (Hope, 2024); the quality of training materials is variable, outdated, or completely inadequate (Stanko and Hohl, 2018); and a reliance on e-learning, which is not viewed as an effective learning tool in a policing context (Honess, 2020, Hadlington et al., 2021).

Research has found that many of the above issues in relation to workload, experience, and training, relate not only to investigating officers on RASSO teams (usually Detective Constables), but also to their supervisors (usually Detective Sergeants), who may not have the skills and/or time to effectively supervise others (HMICFRS, 2021). The Casey Review (2023), for instance, found that: supervision and management were 'woefully lacking' in the MPS, supervisors could not access training, and were offered no support in the role. This could result in supervisors 'improvising' on how to do the job, and early problems relating to individuals and teams not being identified and dealt with expediently. These issues were also highlighted in a national analysis by the College of Policing, which found that poor supervision and leadership were one of the 'perennial policing problems' (Moreton et al., 2022). Inadequate supervision and support for investigating officers was related to mental and physical health issues, poor morale, lack of dedication and goodwill, and stress and burnout, which not only negatively impact officers themselves but also case outcomes.

While there is an established body of research highlighting the institutional challenges facing RASSO policing, and some of the Government reviews outlined in this introduction have highlighted the interlinked nature of these issues, much of this research to date looks at these issues in isolation. To address this, we interviewed 50 police officers from four English and Welsh police forces to explore the institutional challenges they face in investigating RASSO. While the primary focus of this article was on identifying and understanding these institutional barriers, the findings were also considered in relation to organisational attention dynamics within policing, which may help explain how such challenges persist despite repeated reform efforts (Ocasio, 1997, Ocasio, 2011).

Materials and methods

Participants

Fifty police officers, working across the four forces involved in the Operation Soteria Bluestone[1] (OSB) Year 1 deep-dive, were interviewed. There were between 10–17 officers from each force. Ranks ranged from Police Constable (PC), Detective Constable (DC), Detective Sergeant (DS), Detective Inspector (DI), Detective Superintendent (Det Supt), and Senior Management (SM). Given the

sensitivity of this research, only the forces are given any type of identifiers in the Findings section (Force 1, 2, 3, 4); individual participants are not to protect anonymity and confidentiality.

Materials

An information sheet and consent form were prepared for potential participants, which outlined details about the research, including the aim, background, and purpose of the study, in addition to their confidential participation and how the data would be anonymised. A semi-structured interview schedule was designed to explore the challenges associated with investigating RASSO, including e.g., intelligence and evidence gathering, joint working with other agencies, victim – versus suspect-focus approaches to investigations, consideration of repeat and named suspects, and administrative and organisational issues.

Procedure

This study was approved by the ethics committees at both Bournemouth University and the University of Suffolk. The academic leads worked with police leads from each force to recruit participants and organise data collection. Officers were under no obligation to take part, and no incentives to participate were offered. In one force, to protect anonymity and comply with their data protection requirements, police leads arranged and selected participants for interview. In this force, interviews were conducted via telephone, with the officer calling the interviewer on a withheld number. In the other three forces, police leads put together anonymous lists of officers from RASSO teams; these officers were then invited for interview by academic leads. In these forces, interviews took place on Microsoft Teams. Two researchers took part in each interview, with one interviewing and one notetaking.

In total, researchers conducted 50 interviews – with an average duration of one hour each – between October 2021 and June 2022. Each interview was audio recorded, and the recordings uploaded to Sharepoint, a secure online data sharing platform. Interviews were transcribed using transcription software and then manually checked by researchers. Recordings were permanently deleted after the interviews were transcribed.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The process of conducting a thematic analysis that was followed in this study includes the six phases articulated by Braun and Clarke. In phase 1, the researcher immersed themselves in the data, reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews, recording initial ideas and possible patterns within the data. In phase 2, the researcher generated initial codes, identifying aspects within the data of interest and organising the data into meaningful sets. In phase 3, these codes were sorted into themes; both broader 'master' themes and narrower 'sub-themes'. In phase 4, the themes were refined; some discarded, some merged, and some broken down further. In phase 5, the themes were given names to identify them and set out in a table. Finally, in phase 6, the themes were written into a coherent narrative using participant quotes embedded within it, supported by literature in the area.

All three authors conducted the analysis manually and independently, with the first author analysing data from two forces and the second and third authors analysing one force each. A subsequent conversation between the three researchers explored where there were common themes and any divergences. The initial independent coding and subsequent discussions – along with the presence of both an interviewer and a notetaker when the interviews were conducted – a step that was taken to promote impartiality throughout the process. While the data were not collected originally specifically for the purpose of exploring institutional challenges within RASSO policing, we asked specifically asked about investigative challenges. Only themes related to institutional challenges are presented in this paper.

The deliberate choice was made not to use numbers or percentages of officers discussing each theme in the Findings section, as the authors argue that it can be risky to use numbers in qualitative work. Risks may include issues such as reducing evidence to the *amount* of evidence, inference of generalisability of conclusions, and making a report seem more 'scientific' without actually contributing to its logic (Maxwell, 2010).

Reflexivity

RASSO is a potentially emotionally challenging area to study. During the main project to preserve researchers' wellbeing as far as possible, and mitigate harm, regular and compulsory individual and group clinical supervision took place throughout the project. Additionally, the first author (as qualitative lead) held weekly team meetings to discuss both the progress of work, as well as any areas researchers might be experiencing as psychologically difficult or triggering. Individual meetings could also be arranged ad hoc, and the first author could discuss any personal issues with Pillar leads. Whilst the analysis was conducted for this paper the authors met regularly and supported each other.

Findings

Table 1 summarises the three main themes and seven sub-themes that were identified.

Staffing

Lack of resources and high workloads

As found in previous research (Hohl and Stanko, 2025; Walley et al., 2025), a lack of resources was a consistent theme across all forces, with chronically understaffed RASSO teams who could not deal with the volume of cases:

> [There are] quite simply, not enough people, I know police officers say that all the time, but I promise you, it's the case here. We simply do not have enough detectives to deal with the volume of crime that we face (Force 1).

Insufficient government funding is often cited as the main reason for police under-resourcing (Harding et al., 2024), which was acknowledged here: 'We're actually really short of money and we don't have the funds or resources' (Force 1). Supporting previous research (Wilson and Miles-Johnson, 2024), participants also reported issues with both recruitment and retention in RASSO teams, leading to under-staffing. Officers, for example, talked of how recruitment is difficult due to: teams not being specialist (and therefore not prestigious), poor working/shift patterns, rape being seen as a difficult crime to investigate, and the protracted nature of investigations.

> If you make it specialist, it attracts … people with experience because they can say, you know, I'm on a specialist unit … People don't want to come to us because they want to go on to what they call specialist units (Force 1).

Also supporting previous research with officers (e.g. George and Ferguson, 2021), participants spoke of problems retaining existing staff, who frequently do not stay long on RASSO teams, leading to high staff turnover: 'There's a huge problem in terms of staffing of the rape teams … every single person on my team left within the last year' (Force 1). This leads to high vacancy rates on teams: 'It's the lack of staff … I have got ten vacancies, which is almost 25% of my workforce' (Force 3).

Table 1. Institutional challenges: Main themes and sub-themes.

1. Staffing	1.1 Lack of resources and high workloads 1.2 Inexperienced staff 1.3 Supervision issues
2. Training	2.1 Lack of RASSO training 2.2. Inadequate systems training
3. Technology	3.1 Lack of access to equipment/systems 3.2 Systems are not user-friendly

One officer detailed workload, finances, lack of prestige and/or recognition, and shift patterns as reasons for this high turnover:

> They realise they could go and work in another area, right, get paid the same amount of money and do a lot less … They were moving into homicide, different areas because it was just easier, going in back into uniform because they get paid more to push a baton. Or go and become a sergeant because you get you shift elements … I've done exit interviews with all my staff. And that's the main reason they're just not recognised as detectives. They're not recognised for the work they do (Force 3).

This last observation, relating to feeling recognised and valued, is supported by law enforcement officers in Scheer et al. (2024).

In accordance with previous research (HMICFRS, 2021), under-resourcing was talked of as going together with high demand: 'The biggest barrier we have in relation to investigating this type of crime is the demand and resources' (Force 2). Officers spoke of the sheer volume of cases being reported and investigated – 'The amount of workload that we have at the moment is absolutely overwhelming for the number of staff we have' (Force 4) – with some detectives holding around double the number of cases that they thought reasonable or manageable (although there is no formal cap). As one officer said: 'Some are carrying 30 investigations, which is not okay' (Force 1).

Furthermore, depending on the structure of their teams, participants spoke of having to set aside RASSO investigations for competing demands on their time, such as volume crime, other serious assaults, homicide, policing demonstrations, dealing with prisoners, and assisting other teams. These competing demands may 'distract us from doing massive [RASSO] investigations … it's just too unwieldy … we've got all the demands of all the RASSO cases, plus the demands of everything else as well' (Force 3). With little time to work on ongoing investigations, officers are, simply put, 'firefighting'; ongoing investigations are frequently put on the 'backburner' as newer cases take precedence, until they too are set aside for the next new case. This constant, unrelenting, demand, paired with a lack of staff, means that investigations are frequently not dealt with in a timely manner, which then has a knock-on effect on victims and suspects:

> I feel that if we had more officers on this department, we would be able to spend more quality time on our investigations and it feels like you're fighting fire every day … when there's new cases reported every day, it just becomes really difficult to give that case your focus that it deserves really. And then I noticed that victims and suspects in the investigation are becoming unhappy because of the time it's taken for an investigation to take place. It can take months and/or years. And that's kind of the distressing for everyone. And it's just purely because there's just so many incidents that are reported to us that's just impossible to do things quicker. (Force 4).

In addition to the impact on victims and suspects, under-resourcing and high workloads have an impact on officers' wellbeing. Many officers described being under intense levels of pressure: 'I stress and lose sleep about it'. Supporting research by Sondhi et al. (2023), some officers went further to directly highlight the lack of institutional care and support for officers' welfare: 'We break people, they burn out'.

Whereas proper resourcing, leading to reduced workloads, could: allow individual officers to properly focus their attention on both ongoing and new cases and progress them in a timely manner, increase officer wellbeing, and ultimately improve investigative outcomes:

> Real results can happen if we have time and the resources to really goes through these crime reports … rather than having to firefight, doing the bare minimum just to tick it over … if there was more time to investigate, to actually dedicate into pursuing the lines of enquiry right until the end, then I think that the results can and will be a lot better. (Force 1).

Inexperienced staff

As found in previous research (e.g. George and Ferguson, 2021), linked to the issues of resource and workload is that of inexperienced staff: 'The main two challenges for me at the moment are the volume of work and the number of staff, and skills and experience of the staff' (Force 3). Participants

across forces told how rape teams were often made up of predominantly young officers, inexperienced in both service and life: 'We've got a very young workforce which, you know, has got very little experience' (Force 4).

As found by Casey (2023), a lack of resources may mean that officers who are not accredited detectives are working on rape teams: 'We do try to ensure that they're accredited detectives … we will try to achieve that, but with resources and turnover, that's not always possible' (Force 4). These unaccredited/in training/direct entry/student detectives were often described as, 'having to work through a workbook' (Force 1).

These issues were acknowledged by the younger, less-experienced officers themselves. Participants described how trainee detectives could even be leading investigations and interviewing suspects and victims, with one participant voicing that this 'unsettles me greatly … The thought of something happening to me or someone close to me, and then they're being investigated by somebody with six months' service … that's incredible' (Force 1).

Participants believed that while young officers could have many other valuable qualities – such as being hard working, motivated, enthusiastic, and clever – their lack of experience was a crucial issue:

> Whilst they all come very highly motivated, very enthusiastic, and they're clearly very intelligent people, for me, their lack of experience in the basics of investigation, what I would call kind of the foundation, because they're missing that, it makes it very, very difficult for us to kind of crack on (Force 1).

As found in previous research, this means that officers may not have the skills and experience needed to conduct RASSO investigations (George and Ferguson, 2021). To develop this experience, they frequently 'learn on the job', which may put extra pressure on more experienced officers. This is compounded by the dissolution of official mentoring programmes, leaving new recruits to be assisted by more experienced team members on an ad hoc and informal basis, reliant on their time and goodwill.

> When I first [joined] I had a mentor for one month and a half, two months, which was quite nice … But that's no longer the case as far as I'm aware … no specific sort of one-to-one mentor who can assist them fully throughout their initial sort of training. (Force 4).

As found by Murphy-Oikonen et al. (2023), officers also talked of the possible effects on RASSO victims of inexperienced officers, as they may not have dealt with vulnerable and traumatised victims before:

> Some of the officers that are now investigating these cases have two or three years' experience of policing and, without being rude, they're young people, young in life experience themselves. And have probably often never even come in contact with the socioeconomic group of the victim that they're now actually supporting. And their understanding is minimal really. (Force 1)

For all of these reasons, many officers believed that it should be mandatory for detectives to be both fully accredited, and also to have worked as a detective in another unit before working on RASSO cases. However, it should be noted that some officers did express an alternative view, being of the opinion that older, highly experienced detectives, could become jaded and unmotivated: 'A lot of older officers … tend to lose interest in police … a lot of those are lazy people that don't want to work and have a passion for this area' (Force 3).

In summary, it was emphasised that the issue of both resources and experience is key: 'We are just drowning because the resources, and the experience issue … We need the people. We need the experience' (Force 1). Without resourcing and experience, in the worst cases, as one officer starkly said: 'It's an absolute shambles. There is no service to the public. There is no investigation. They're full of student officers and the service we're delivering is awful' (Force 3).

Supervision

Supporting research by HMICFRS (2021), officers across forces noted issues with supervision, which were linked to resourcing, workload, and inexperience, frequently reporting: insufficient numbers

and high turnover of supervisors, supervisors who were not accredited detectives, and supervisors who were unfamiliar with basic detective duties:

> I think I've probably had about 12–13 supervisors in a two and a half year period, which is ridiculous. And those supervisors, a lot of them … were never detectives, never been accredited detectives and coming from a background where they'd never done any kind of investigations. And I'll be honest, I did raise at one point they were trying to put a sergeant into my role who'd never investigated a rape or attempt murder and never been to Crown Court, never did a full file. And I have to push back to say 'no, you can't do that, that's wrong'. I was basically told 'you're going to have him, that's it.' (Force 3).

Supervisory experience is crucial, as RASSO supervisors have 'hard decisions' to make, perhaps more so than in other crimes, due to the unique nature of the crime, and its investigation and prosecution (Casey, 2023). Yet, if supervisors lack experience and confidence, they may 'shy away from' making tough decisions, leaving this to the CPS and therefore leaving victims in limbo for longer:

> I suppose because of the nature of the crime as well, supervisors find it difficult to make hard decisions on cases, evidentially, because the risk around offenders, the risk to victims can often cloud people's judgement around … whether evidence is going to be good enough to take the case through to court, so people can shy away from sometimes making it. And if a decision where actually a prosecutor is clearly going to NFA [No Further Action], but we will put it to a prosecutor to let them make a decision and keep a victim hanging on and hanging on at times (Force 3).

Supervisors themselves also recounted how they struggled to keep up with demand, reporting on overseeing numbers of cases that were way above what they could effectively supervise:

> I just I checked the scores on the doors this morning, and I've got 113 [cases] … how I'm expected to manage and supervise that amount? It's almost when it gets well anywhere over 70, I'd say you're really struggling to keep up to date … the fact of the matter now is that people in my office are coming up to me and saying, this is what's happening. This is an update. I just got off the phone with X, Y, Z, this is happening. And I'm looking at them blankly because I don't know what they're talking about. And I personally don't like that as a supervisor … I like my finger on the pulse. I like to do a good job effectively. And I feel like I'm getting lost in the volume of what's going on. (Force 4)

Crucially, this supervisory overload impacts investigations and the service provided to victims:

> We're losing investigative opportunities because things are being missed … And the risk that we're carrying is horrible to think that, you know, that we're going to miss things and it's not fair for the victims. (Force 4)

Supervisors also talked of the welfare impact on them of carrying too many cases – '[For] some of us, they are massively long hours, which is great for the overtime, but also really, really tiring and exhausting' (Force 3) – which supports research by Moreton et al. (2022). This should be contextualised with the inexperienced and overworked officers that supervisors are managing, which is likely to increase their workload.

Training

No specialist RASSO training

As found in previous research (George and Ferguson, 2021, HMICFRS, 2021), officers are not just coming into RASSO investigations without basic investigative experience – as explored above – they are coming into the role without any specialist training or knowledge in investigating RASSO:

> It's a lack of understanding that rape is very different to your burglaries, your robberies, your attempted murders … You should be a detective who understands how to undertake investigation, how to rationalise whether you're going to review a phone or third party material, having to keep up with CPS, understanding forensically what you need to send off, understanding the threshold tests. There's so much that in a rape investigation you have to look at. (Force 3)

Officers across three of the four forces noted there was no mandatory specialist training for investigating RASSO: 'There's no specific rape, sexual assault training course' (Force 1), which contradicts

the provision of the nationally available SSAIDP course, but is consistent with findings from other research (Williams et al., 2022). Wider OSB research has found that a lack of specialist knowledge and training (Stanko, 2022) may impact officers, victims, and investigations. This was echoed by officers here, who spoke of how detectives who have had no RASSO training and may not understand the effects of trauma and victim behaviour in the aftermath of rape, which may impact both victims and investigative outcomes:

> The reality is … they come into contact with the victims … And it's important that they fully understand the barriers, the emotional side and all of that because it gives context of what has actually happened … which explains why the victim may have deviated from what the public expects basically. Bit of a horrible way of putting it, but that's the reality. And it sometimes creates a greater opportunity to get a positive outcome from the case, and that can be missing (Force 1).

This is supported by research that has found that specialised police training in sexual offending is a key factor in improving police performance and attitudes; the quality and outcomes of investigations; in addition to victim engagement (Darwinkel et al., 2013; Turnley, 2014; Stanko, 2022).

In one force, officers had undertaken ad hoc and non-compulsory RASSO training around trauma, to better understand rape myths and how to conduct suspect-focused, rather than victim-focused investigations (in which it is the suspect's behaviour before, during, and after the offence that is scrutinised, rather than that of the victim) (Hohl and Stanko, 2015). This training was viewed positively by officers, who believed that it should be a compulsory pre-requisite of joining RASSO teams:

> There should be an introductory kind of training week for people who come on these teams to say, look, these are the myths, are you aware of these myths, this is why people don't report straight away. And rather than focusing on what they didn't do, why don't you focus on what the perpetrator was doing? (Force 4)

However, in other forces where similar RASSO training was available, in support of previous research, it was found that officers may be too overwhelmed with day-to-day police work to undertake training and CPD (Stanko, 2022): 'We seem to sacrifice training because people don't have time to train because the demand's so great on our day-to-day job' (Force 3). This supports research that has found that, although RASSO investigators are required to have completed the CoP's designed and licensed SSAIDP, this requirement is often unmet (HMICFRS, 2021, Williams et al., 2022).

Inadequate systems training

An issue that is less well researched, but arose as a strong theme here, is how police officers may not all be trained to use the systems and equipment that they regularly rely on to investigate RASSO. The examples that came up repeatedly were training in: (a) the usage of mobile phone download machines/systems; and (b) the Police National Database (PND), which conducts nationwide background searches on suspects, both of which are crucial tools in RASSO investigations:

> There's not many trained officers that can download phones. I think we have one on our team of … there's 10 of us. And then on the other team, there's another 10 and nobody there. So just one in 20 at the moment. Which is just ridiculous, because nearly every investigation has at least one phone, if not three or four. (Force 1)

> [The PND] it's one of those things we have to have a course in order to have access. And we've seen those courses are in fairly short supply. And when they come up, obviously there aren't many spaces, and they're not just looking at our unit to fill those courses. (Force 1)

The reliance on a single person on a team, or an outside team, to conduct searches/downloads, almost always causes investigative delays:

> It's like how long's a piece of string really? There's no rhyme or reason to them. I've had PND checks done relatively quickly within about two weeks, and then I've sent some off in February that I still haven't heard back yet. (Force 4)

> You will get it [a phone download] back within 30 days [if sent to a specialist team marked as a priority] … But yeah, if it's not the 30 days, then it just gets put as a standard, which could be nine months. (Force 3)

As also found by HMICFRS (2021), long delays in downloading mobile phones may negatively impact victims:

> People are quite sensitive about the phones, especially because we can't always download them in a day, because of the fact that we haven't got many people trained … So if they have to be sent away, or we have to wait for somebody to be free to do it, then we're keeping those for longer. And I don't blame them [victims], to be honest. I wouldn't want my phone being taken for days and days on end. (Force 3)

Research has found that victims being separated from their mobile phones for lengthy periods may be felt as re-victimising (Dodge et al., 2019) and also lead to investigative impacts such as victim withdrawal from the process (George and Ferguson, 2021).

Considering PND checks, the lack of trained officers may not only cause investigative delays, but may also, in the worst cases, lead to PND checks not being conducted at all, which previous research notes may result in repeat offences and offenders being missed (Davies et al., 2022). Officers expressed (sometimes intense) frustration about how training has not been more widely rolled out in these areas:

> If I had a pound for every time I suggested that somebody came in and just trained us all in one day on the [PND] database at once, I'd be a rich man. It, it just doesn't happen, I couldn't tell you why … It's exactly the same story with [downloading phones]. And that's one of the things that I've suggested. You know, why don't we all have as a whole team, we go up to [X] or wherever and they train us all at once so that we can all do it and then it arguably solves one of the biggest problems we've got … And it hasn't happened and it doesn't happen. And I can't explain it. (Force 1)

In short, participants believed that training all RASSO officers to conduct downloads/searches themselves would be invaluable in conducting more timely, efficient, and effective investigations.

Technology

Lack of access to systems

Supporting previous research (George and Ferguson, 2021) and related to Theme 2.2 regarding officers not being trained on various force systems, is the issue that not all officers – trained or otherwise – having access to them. This issue was frequently attributed to a lack of licenses due to funding/cost cutting exercises. For example, officers talked of licensing constraints meaning that they did not all have direct individual access to the most basic intelligence database, the Police National Computer (PNC), which officers use to conduct instant checks on whether a suspect has any convictions and gives the details of these:

> I'm lucky I can do it myself [PNC checks] because I have access in my role … But no, for other officers who haven't got access individually, there is a process where you can request those checks to be undertaken. (Force 4)

This problem also applies to the PND – 'Quite often things are licenced like Police National Database' (Force A) – an issue which was highlighted by Hohl and Stanko (2025). Supporting Davies et al. (2022), this lack of access may result in crucial background checks not being performed and repeat suspects missed:

> PND isn't always checked because none of us have got access to PND, and we've been asking for ages, but because of a license we can't have people trying to do it … So, no, it might not get done [checking PND for repeat offences]. (Force 3)

Licensing issues were not only an issue with regard to the PNC and PND. Officers in one force also described how a force-specific system used in order to upload audio and video files was hampered by licensing issues. This, in turn, puts pressure on staff members who do have licenses:

> There's a system called [X] now, which we used to upload kind of audio and video tape for our case files. But because of the licensing issues, they only issue so many licenses. So, for instance, on my team, I'm the only one who's got it. So if anyone needs anything uploading, I'm the only one who can do it … [and] there's a

> lot of things that need to be uploaded a lot of the time … when I'm not there, just kind of either someone else on one of the other teams has to do it or they just wait till I'm back, which doesn't make sense. But we've asked about the licensing issue, and they won't give us anymore. Again, it's cost. (Force 3)

In addition to licensing issues preventing access to vital intelligence systems, officers also spoke of an insufficiency in the amount/number of equipment/systems. This was most frequently mentioned in the context of mobile phone download machines being in short supply; machines that are considered 'critical' for officers to access to conduct downloads in a timely fashion, both to assist the investigation and in the interests of fairness to victims:

> There's a lack of [phone download] machines … [it] can take weeks to get something downloaded. To get a victim to give up phone for that long is unacceptable, the victim's got everything on their phone, it's their lifeline. (Force 1).

Thus, just as human under-resourcing, as explored in Theme 1.1, is a crucial institutional challenge, so too is systems under-resourcing – 'The issues that we have, apart from staffing level, I think is lack of resources' (Force 1) – where officers do not always readily have access to the equipment they need in order to conduct effective and efficient investigations, supporting research by George and Ferguson (2021).

Force intelligence systems to be user friendly

The last institutional challenge, which appears under-researched in the literature, is that it revolves around technological issues with internal force systems, which may again impede officers from doing their job in an effective and efficient manner. Officers talked about how their internal systems were challenging or difficult to operate. For example, in one force, a new intelligence system had recently been launched force-wide – taught through an online PowerPoint presentation rather than in-person training – that was deemed to be:

> So hard, so cumbersome. It's so difficult, especially on your files … It's probably the worst system I've seen in this quarter of the 22 years I've been in … the [SYSTEM] is our biggest challenge that we've had for years. (Force 3)

This is supported by wider OSB research, which noted problems with 'outdated and clunky' systems (Hohl and Stanko, 2025). Officers also talked about how they lacked one joined-up system – that could produce all the information needed on a suspect – instead having to rely on different systems that don't 'talk to each other', to piece together a complete profile of a suspect:

> There's a team that are working on a new IT system … I mean maybe this is ideal world scenario, but I think that you should be able to log on to the system, type someone's name into it … and then everything … should be brought up in some nice, presentable, format where you can scroll through it and pick out the relevant information about that person that you need. And that doesn't happen at the moment, you have to sometimes go and log into individual systems, such as [W], [X], or [Y] or [Z] in order to piece together all the intelligence profile of an individual. Or you put a request in to the [X TEAM] to create that profile for you. And it doesn't seem like twenty-first century policing, really. (Force 1)

Such technological issues can lead to a disjointed and ultimately inefficient system:

> The [X] system won't talk to [Y] doesn't talk to [Z]. And you get a lot of repetition. The net result of that is that not all the information gets recorded everywhere, and it does create a fragmented … system. (Force 1)

This may then lead to missed investigative opportunities or errors, such as background checks on suspects not being conducted (as found in Davies et al., 2022) or conducted but not recorded:

> I think those checks are being done. They're just not being recorded … and that's probably because [SYSTEM] is more difficult … it feels like it's clunky. And I think there's a risk there. (Force 3)

Relatedly, officers also spoke of systems between the police and CPS not being 'joined up' or 'speaking to each other', creating frustration, extra work, and ultimately delays in cases. This is explored under the theme of police/CPS communication in Gekoski et al. (2023a), where officers across

forces – regardless of the system their force used – reported incompatibilities with CPS systems. This frequently resulted in issues such as: files getting lost in transit or 'bounced back'; glitches in systems, and issues with sending large files/images: 'The system what we've got sometimes doesn't work very well, and sometimes you're not sure whether the items have actually been sent' (Force 3); 'There's issues of the [SYSTEM] we find a lot. So the CPS will bounce files back to us, because there's missing files there … even though we have sent them on our system' (Force 4).

Finally, officers spoke of issues with phone download equipment/machines, such as glitches in systems meaning that downloads may take lengthy amounts of time, not produce the requested information, or not work at all.

> You can start downloading and you don't realise it hasn't downloaded till the end … So you could be sitting there for three or four hours waiting for something to be downloaded to find actually, it hasn't. But there's nothing you can do (Force 3).

These findings are consistent with May et al.'s (2022) findings from OSB. Given the various technological/systems issues faced by officers, participants spoke of the need for specialist digital investigators who could assist in, e.g. conducting intelligence searches, downloading phones, and CCTV inquiries:

> Some people are more technical savvy than others … I actually want a [digital specialist] on each team who basically does that. And that's their role. They're not an investigator. Their role is to provide support and guidance around when we're doing these applications, when we do mobile phone downloads. They do them, and we have another two or three people trained as well, so we have got a backup and contingency. (Force 3)

Perhaps the last word should go to this officer, who observed around technology that:

> The world has moved on and we haven't moved on with it. The amount of work that goes into phones, computers, laptops, time doing third party material, no consideration has been in moving us as an organisation forward, dealing with those sort of things which take time. (Force 3)

Discussion

This article draws together some of the most pressing institutional challenges faced by officers working in England and Wales on rape and serious sex offence investigations. Officers interviewed in this research identified the myriad institutional challenges well established in the literature and outlined in the introduction, including staffing issues relating to a lack of resources and consequent high workloads, inexperienced staff working on complex cases, and supervision issues. They highlighted a lack of RASSO training – or space to complete their training – as well as a lack of systems training related to their role.

A lesser-considered institutional challenge in the existing literature that was identified in this research was that of IT/systems/equipment issues, which – particularly in combination with the other challenges explored thus far – may impede officers doing their jobs to the best of their ability. For example, RASSO leads interviewed by George and Ferguson (2021) found that understaffing, inexperience, and inadequate training were compounded by officers not being well equipped to do their jobs, citing poor investment in up-to-date IT systems, technology, software, and equipment, which could impact the quality of investigations and experience of victims. Furthermore, both police and CPS participants talked of how their IT systems were not compatible with one another, an issue that was also highlighted in Gekoski et al. (2023b), which may contribute to issues such as files getting lost in transit or 'bounced back', glitches in systems, and issues with sending large files/images. Wider OSB research also found that police forces have 'outdated and clunky IT systems', and that not all staff have licenses to use systems such as the [open-strick]Police National Database ([close-strick]PND[open-strick])[close-strick] (Hohl and Stanko, 2025). This can result in checks on suspects being missed, delayed, and not recorded, as well as repeat suspects going unidentified (Davies et al., 2022). The addition of Pillar 6 to the original 5-Pillar model after the pilot of

OSB (and the subsequent findings relating to the use of digital material in May et al., 2022) is indicative of the importance of digital material and technology within RASSO policing. All the institutional challenges noted here resulted in poor officer wellbeing and significant stress, which are, again, well documented in the literature (Sondhi et al., 2023), although it was noted that these issues were exacerbated by a deliberate lack of care and support on the part of the institution.

Our findings are congruent with Brown and Fleming's recent analysis of 'why the police find it so difficult to investigate rape?' (2024, p. 139), in which they observe that.

> Officers are hampered in their investigations by inadequate infra-structural support such as effective training, supervision, and analytic capability and also their experience of stress reactions to excessive workloads and exposure to traumatic material.

It is clear that many of these issues are not new; they are, in fact, longstanding issues that much of policing has had to contend with for many years (Home Office, 2023, Brown and Fleming, 2024). The value of this article, however, is in the presentation of new data – as opposed to a review of existing information – which shows these to be ongoing challenges within RASSO policing in England and Wales (at least, ongoing at the point of conducting the interviews in 2021-2022, which is discussed further below). This article also depicts how these institutional challenges interact with each other, articulating the scale of these challenges and indicating their knock-on effect on RASSO policing. When considering these challenges as intrinsically linked – the interrelated nature of under-resourcing, the influx of inexperienced officers, and the lack of time for appropriate training for instance – it is evident that addressing these challenges in silo is unlikely to generate the change required to see meaningful improvement in the service to victims and the ability to apprehend perpetrators. Throwing technology at the problem will not solve the fact that there are too few officers to use it. Providing additional training will not make up for the fact that officers do not have time to take part in it, nor will it compensate for a lack of supporting technology and access if this issue is not simultaneously addressed. The recruitment of more officers will not compensate for the poor working conditions and lack of focus on officer wellbeing that results in the high turnovers seen here. Our findings suggest that a vicious cycle (a term that has been used in relation to rape victims experiences with the criminal justice system by Munro and Kelly, 2009) may have established itself: if teams are understaffed, existing officers have heavier workloads; if officers have heavier workloads, this may lead to burn out; if officers are burned out, this may lead to retention issues; if there is poor retention, RASSO teams become even more under-resourced, and more pressure is put on existing officers.

These findings can also be interpreted through an organisational attention perspective. Organisational attention theory proposes that organisational behaviour is shaped not simply by the existence of problems but by how decision-makers allocate their limited attention across competing issues and demands (Ocasio, 1997). Within complex organisations such as policing, 'attention structures' – including workload allocation systems, supervisory practices, performance frameworks, and information infrastructures – channel attention towards certain priorities while pushing others to the periphery (Ocasio and Joseph, 2005; Ocasio, 2011). In the context described by officers in this study, chronic demand, high caseloads, inexperienced staffing, and fragmented technological systems function as conditions that structure attention towards immediate case management and operational triage rather than reflective practice, organisational learning, or sustained reform implementation. From this perspective, the persistence of many of the issues identified in successive inquiries into rape investigations may not simply reflect a failure to recognise problems, but the difficulty of maintaining sustained organisational attention on reform in environments characterised by competing operational pressures.

Ultimately, adequate and appropriate resourcing is the absolute fundamental aspect of effective and successful RASSO teams. Without this foundation, there is little chance of meaningful change in the investigation of rape. However, as Walley et al. (2025) noted, throwing resources at the problem does not solve the issue of the number of inexperienced staff that are then expected to lead on

complex investigations, further highlighting the interrelated nature of these issues. This is further articulated by James et al. (2025), who noted that reducing investigative capacity to simply headcount does not work and instead requires consideration of detectives' expertise, team stability. In short, siloed thinking and siloed change will not work to improve the practice of RASSO investigations. Only a concerted, cohesive effort to implement change on multiple levels will result in meaningful improvements to the policing of RASSO.

While these issues persist, the effects on RASSO investigations are clear. Pillars 1 and 2 findings from Year 1 of OSB (2021-2022) highlighted that basic investigative actions were missed (Davies et al., 2022, Horvath et al., 2022). This included a lack of fundamental intelligence gathering on the suspect, stereotypes being used to close cases (due to poor officer attitude (Gekoski et al., 2023a) and also the necessity to close cases based on overwhelming demand), cases being left to drift due to officer inexperience, and little evidence that investigative strategies were being reflected on or strategic thinking engaged around repeat offending or wider risk mitigation and offending disruption strategies (Davies et al., 2022, Horvath et al., 2022). Investigations must have the institutional support and set up required to be able to make officer-focused improvements to the investigation of RASSO.

It is also important to acknowledge that institutional constraints may interact with individual-level decision-making processes. Research in psychology and behavioural decision-making suggests that under conditions of high workload, time pressure, and uncertainty, individuals are more likely to rely on heuristics or cognitive shortcuts when making judgements (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974, Kahneman, 2011). Within investigative contexts this may influence how officers assess credibility, evidential strength, and investigative priorities. Such reliance on heuristic processing may increase the likelihood that stereotypes or rape myths influence investigative judgements, particularly where officers are inexperienced or lack specialist training (Ask and Granhag, 2005). Organisational reforms alone may therefore have limited impact if they do not simultaneously address the working conditions that shape how officers interpret and apply investigative guidance in practice.

We acknowledge here that since the interviews were conducted in 2021–2022, changes have been made to the investigation of RASSO. In recognition of how a lack of training and specialist knowledge can affect victims and investigations, for instance, the government pledged to deliver specialist RASSO training to 2,000 officers by May 2024 (Home Office, 2024b). As of this date, more than double this number (4,500 officers) had completed the rape and serious sexual offences investigative skills development programme (RISDP), and since September 2024 revised SSAIDP and first responder courses have all been rolled out (Home Office, 2024b). OSB research has influenced and shaped the development of all RASSO training now available. OSB has also been credited with impacting the charge rates of RASSO, which have recently trebled to seven per cent (Perkins, 2025). These are shifts that suggest change at an organisational level, although there remains an important evidence gap, as publicly available independent evaluations of these training initiatives and their impact on investigative practice and outcomes have yet to be published.

Despite these changes, more recent research suggests that these institutional challenges remain. While conducted with a wider breadth of officers, for instance, the recency of the data collected by James et al. (2025) (January to December 2024) suggests longstanding and pervasive issues within policing that will require considerable effort to overcome. The most recent HMICFRS report (2024) into the progress to introduce the National Operating Model (NOM; produced as part of OSB) noted that while positive change was present, such as a demonstrable cultural change in how victims are supported, fundamental concerns remain, such as the fact that some forces do not understand the extent of RASSO in their areas, with an acknowledged concern that resource gaps in multiple areas will present an increasing issue as the formal NOM guidance develops.

Although the institutional barriers identified in this study were evident across the four participating forces, the way in which these challenges manifested inevitably varied between sites. For example, some forces experienced particular pressures related to staffing shortages, others highlighted technological limitations or licensing constraints, while others emphasised supervisory

capacity. This suggests that while many of the issues described reflect systemic features of RASSO policing nationally, they are mediated through local organisational arrangements and resources.

So how does RASSO policing in England and Wales improve under these circumstances? Recent findings using data presented in the Baroness Casey report, as well as the Angiolini Inquiry Part 1 Report, and data collected as part of Pillar 4 of OSB, demonstrate the production of organisational ignorance in the policing of RASSO (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2024), and the subsequent changes in approach that need to be made to enact meaningful institutional improvement. Evidence of avoidance of uncomfortable knowledge, such as denial and dismissal, was shown to be present in RASSO policing, as was organisational silence in the face of work stress and poor officer mental health, and issues of both toxic leadership and the belief that supervisors had no power to make positive change. Organisational failure to learn was also highlighted as an issue, with disconnection across rank structure supporting the continued prevalence of operational ignorance. Finally, and perhaps critically in terms of understanding how change can be enacted, what the authors dubbed a 'bias for action and operations rather than planning, reflection, and strategy' (p.7). Viewed through an organisational attention lens, this bias towards immediate operational action may also reflect the structural conditions under which policing organisations operate. High-demand environments tend to prioritise rapid response and case throughput over reflective learning and long-term organisational development (Ocasio, 1997, Ocasio, 2011). Where organisational attention is repeatedly drawn towards immediate operational pressures, reform initiatives risk becoming episodic rather than sustained, limiting their capacity to produce durable institutional change.

The blame culture often seen in policing prevents the admission of failure that is necessary for reform to occur (Metcalfe, 2017), and it is argued here that our findings support the notion that change in this space cannot be a reactive set of actions designed to minimise poor publicity. Strategies to enact change that do not consider proper reflection, planning, and strategy are unlikely to capture the complex and interrelated nature of the issues we have presented and so are unlikely to lead to the significant and broad change needed to make meaningful improvements to the policing of RASSO. We agree that action is necessary, but the way that action is implemented and the strategy behind it cannot be lost at the cost of being seen to enact change immediately. In short, something that does not work is not better than nothing; action must be meaningful.

A starting point for improving RASSO in the long-term is the establishment of a standard to which officers are expected to operate. Operation Soteria provided this through the NOM which includes a range of guidance for the improvement of RASSO investigations (College of Policing, 2025), many of which are officer-focused, such as the Investigator's Journey, which is a detailed account of how an officer should progress through a RASSO investigation (College of Policing, 2023). While there are potential downsides to job standardisation, 'Many researchers working with quality claim that standardisation is a necessary condition not only for reducing variation, generating quality development, and efficiency growth, but also for participation, creativity, and improvement of working conditions' (Poksinska, 2007, p. 384). Alongside this standard is the requirement of rigorous mechanisms for assessing the standard of practice, which may take more time and effort than simply reviewing investigative outcomes (Iliuta et al., 2025), as well as more detailed or experienced supervision than to which officers currently have access (Horvath et al., 2022). Assessing good, as well as poor, practice, too, is also important. For instance, rape scrutiny panels are only typically used when something has gone wrong, which implies that good practice is not captured under these review conditions. So where are officers able to understand the standard to which they are supposed to be working, beyond the day-to-day 'firefighting' of getting through as much as possible in as short a time as possible? If the institution does not set the standard, if it instead perpetuates facets of organisational ignorance as outlined above, then it should come as no surprise that the poor standards evidenced in Angiolini, Soteria, Casey, and elsewhere are similarly allowed to perpetuate. Critically, however, setting a standard sets a bar to which the institution must subsequently hold themselves accountable, ensuring that the mechanisms that allow officers to reach that standard are put in place.

Limitations and future research

The data for this article was collected during the pilot phase and Year 1 of OSB, which took place from September 2021 to September 2022. Year 2 of this project was focused on the development of the NOM, which subsequently went live for mandated use by all forces in June 2023. As noted above, it is therefore likely that institutional change is occurring on the basis of the more organisational recommendations made as part of the NOM, and that policing standards may have changed. Further work is needed to explore if and where gaps around institutional reform still exist; considering this through the lens of organisational theory would be a useful tool. The collaborative nature of OSB allowed researchers and practitioners to work together to produce unprecedented levels of information about the RASSO investigative process and the opportunity to enact real change; future research should continue in this vein to assess and evaluate the impact of such changes made.

Finally, the research outlined here did not evaluate how the individual workings of the 43 forces across England and Wales operate as separate institutions; rather, it discusses the police service and the policing of RASSO as an institution that is monolithic and without individual nuance. There will be differences between how forces operate and the individual requirements based on geographical location, and future research could explore whether institutional challenges interact with location to create individual force challenges.

Conclusion

This article has drawn together and highlighted the interrelated institutional challenges that police officers face when investigating rape and serious sex offences. It demonstrates how these institutional challenges interact such that attempts to tackle them in silo are unlikely to prove an effective method of improving investigative practice. Recent reviews and research into the efficacy of rape and serious sex offence investigations have demonstrated a multitude of issues that require urgent improvement, and which are similarly unlikely to be meaningfully changed without recognition that the system itself needs to be transformed.

Initiatives that tackle one of these challenges without considering the well-documented breadth of related issues in this type of policing only serve as appeasement in the face of a broader problem which cannot be rectified without comprehensive, systematic change. While change has been seen in the landscape of RASSO policing, further work is needed to understand the efficacy of these changes. Further, highlighting the need for institutional change does not negate individual officer responsibility, but as Brown and Fleming (2024) note, 'Solutions to these persistent and resistant problems cannot be resolved by the work of individual officers, although clearly improving practice is a way forward. Change is a corporate problem.' (p.161).

Finally, we wanted to return to the individuals contending with these challenges. The issues that we have outlined here are the context in which our police service is expecting officers to work effectively. It is the expectation that they conduct complex investigations into some of the most serious and harmful offending, hampered by the institutional challenges outlined here. Ignoring the need for inter-related, institutional change is simply not a realistic expectation to drive success in RASSO policing.

Note

1. The data for this study were collected as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone (OSB), funded by the UK Home Office. OSB was designed by Katrin Hohl and Betsy Stanko; work package (pillar) leads were Kari Davies, Miranda Horvath, Kelly Johnson, Jo Lovett, Tiggey May, Olivia Smith, and Emma Williams. OSB aimed to improve the investigation of rape and serious sex offences (RASSO) in England and Wales.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Anna Gekoski:** Investigation; **K. Davies:** Project administration; **M. A. H. Horvath:** Project administration.

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Due to restrictions related to data ownership and sharing, the data are not publicly available.

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