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University of Suffolk

End of Award Report – Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) APP28325: Secondary Data Analysis on Pillar 4 – Operation Soteria

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Five key findings in respect of Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) investigators have emerged from the project:

1. The Primacy of Workload Perceived Manageability Over Volume.
2. The "Presenteeism Trap" as a Behavioural Amplifier of Burnout Risk.
3. Specialist, Mid-Career Vulnerability and Cumulative Stress.
4. The Victim-Centred Practice–Barrier Interaction and Value Dissonance.
5. Organisational Support Shows Modest Direct Effects but Meaningful Moderation.

We supplemented our analyses with four detailed analyses prepared for submission to peer-reviewed journals or as a technical report. Further details on our analyses appear in the appendices to this report.

The findings demonstrate a consistent pathway whereby excessive perceived work demands generate moral and emotional strain, leading to normative presenteeism, where RASSO investigators and staff continue working despite ill health, burnout, and fatigue.

Presenteeism emerged as the strongest predictor of burnout. The analysis of the qualitative data found RASSO investigators describing deep commitments to victim-survivors and strongly held professional values yet frequently felt unable to provide the level of service they believed victims deserved. This generated feelings of guilt, frustration and moral distress that extended beyond conventional understandings of occupational stress.

The findings also reveal that Perceived Professional Capabilities (PPC) is strongly shaped by organisational conditions, particularly access to training and professional development. While wellbeing initiatives existed, these were often viewed as reactive rather than preventative and failed to address the underlying structural causes of stress.

Burnout within RASSO policing should be understood not simply as an individual psychological outcome, but as a systemic organisational problem arising from resource constraints, competing institutional demands and the occupational culture of policing that normalises self-sacrifice.

We suggest that the focus for policing should be on workforce investment, workload management, learning and development, wellbeing support and organisational culture change.

Executive Summary

This project undertook secondary analysis of qualitative and quantitative data collected as part of Operation Soteria Pillar 4, which focuses on learning, development and wellbeing among police officers and staff working within RASSO (Rape and Serious Sexual Offences) investigations (hereafter RASSO investigators). Building on previous findings that RASSO investigators were overworked, under-resourced, and unsupported in their wellbeing and professional development (Gov.UK, 2022), this further study sought to explore the existing data further to better understand the pathways through which organisational conditions contribute to officer stress, presenteeism and burnout; to move beyond defining the problem statement towards more actionable understandings.

A team of four academics from the original Home Office project 'Operation Soteria' were funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to undertake secondary analysis on their original data collection for Pillar 4 of the project, to understand RASSO investigators' learning, development and wellbeing opportunities.

Using a staged mixed-methods analytical approach, the project integrated qualitative and thematic analysis, combined with quantitative modelling on an investigator wellbeing survey (n=2204). An additional modelling exercise was undertaken. The qualitative analysis used the free-text responses to the survey (n=458). Whilst no a priori theoretical positions were adopted, the interpretation of the analysis was informed by Maslach's Burnout framework within the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, emotional labour theory, institutional logics and the Challenge-Hindrance-Stress (CHS) framework and developed progressively from initial observations of workload pressures through to an integrated model of organisational burnout.

As part of our interpretation of the analytical outputs, we also sought to understand the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for working as RASSO investigators that may affect wellbeing, which we articulate as a value-centred practice (VCP) orientation. This framing recognises investigators as motivated by care-focused, victim-centred, context-led work that pursues criminal justice and suspect-focused outcomes. Our findings suggest that RASSO investigators' rate the seriousness of such cases very highly, they perceived RASSO crimes as second only to, if not worse than, murder. This shapes their desires and motivations to (in paraphrase) 'do the right thing by victims' and 'put offenders behind bars'. However, they operate in circumstances where they do not receive similar resources to those investigating the closest offence type by perceived seriousness, murder, or the likelihood of matching their VCP to outcomes (most murders are solved, and perpetrators charged and convicted whilst most RASSO cases remain unsolved and many perpetrators remain uncharged or convicted). They do so in circumstances where the burden of managing prolonged and often complex investigations falls to them alone, alongside a significant element of victim-survivor contact. We suggest that the delta between likely outcomes and their VCP to 'do the right thing by victims' and 'put offenders behind bars' combined with the psycho-institutional conditions in which they operate, has a bearing on burnout likelihood.

Recommendations

We therefore offer five recommendations to support the organisational and personal management of RASSO investigator learning, development and wellbeing. These findings should be viewed in light of recent workforce reform proposals in policing, which position wellbeing as a core component of professional practice and link officer wellbeing to workforce retention, performance, and public service effectiveness. Key measures include national wellbeing standards, expanded psychological screening, trauma-informed training, improved crisis support and stronger welfare provision for officers exposed to traumatic events or professional investigations.

Workforce Planning: Improve workload manageability, not simply reduce workload volume. The mandated specialist RASSO capacity underpinning the emergent RASSO NOM needs to address underlying perceptions of workload manageability and risks to recovery infrastructure. Our research findings suggest a concentration of burnout among experienced investigators and a consequent long-term erosion of investigative quality. In addition to effectively recognising investigator capacity, a strategic understanding of demand management to build competence and capability is required.

Staffing and Workload: RASSO investigators feel they lack the ability to progress cases effectively, due to perceived workload manageability and lack of training to manage RASSO cases. Caseload reductions alone are unlikely to address burnout; workload policy should be guided by understanding investigators' perceptions of workload manageability (time availability, administrative burden, case complexity relative to available resources and the ability to understand through the correct learning resource), combined with actual demand/resource modelling should be the metric guiding workload policy.

Create a Prevention Architecture: Build recovery opportunities into the working environment. We are currently developing a methodology to support routine assessment of health and wellbeing in police forces, which will inform this recommendation. RASSO investigators often recognise the signs of burnout in their colleagues, but not in themselves, or, when they do, factors inhibit or

significantly delay their willingness to act on them. Stressors were experienced differentially across the lifecycle of an investigation, with First Response Officers (FRO) being exposed to acute stressors in the initial investigative phases and more specialist investigators being exposed to more chronic stressors over the prolonged lifetime of the ongoing investigation. Early intervention targeting presenteeism (through structured (non-punitive) absence protocols, recovery expectation-setting, and workload adjustment mechanisms may prevent progression through the 'burnout cascade' (Weber and Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000) more effectively than generic wellbeing initiatives that almost inevitably target late-stage effects.

Learning Environments as Infrastructure: RASSO investigators' learning, development, and wellbeing are regularly treated as individual concerns, not organisational responsibilities. Wellbeing should be recognised at an organisational level, embedding tangible cultural change underpinned by senior level support, underpinned by trauma-informed supervision and structured reflection . The consistency with which learning climate and development opportunities predict resilience across all three analyses suggests these should be considered foundational wellbeing infrastructure, not optional enhancement. Credible, salient, operationalised learning support proved more protective than generic health policies. This also suggests leaders need to better understand workforce health through health assessments and data based on a wider range of measures than might ordinarily be the case.

Accountability for Organisational Conditions: We suggest increasing psychological safety and normalising help-seeking and reflection, not simply reducing workload volume. The analysis identified three groups, one (55%) of which was significantly less burnt out than the other two. The modest direct effects of individual-level wellbeing support, combined with strong associations between organisational barriers and burnout, suggest accountability should focus on organisational systems and structures to enable sustainable practice, not merely on individuals and their 'resilience.'

Background and Governance

This project undertook secondary analysis of qualitative and quantitative data collected as part of Operation Soteria Pillar 4, which focuses on learning, development and wellbeing among police officers and staff working within RASSO (Rape and Serious Sexual Offences) investigations (hereafter RASSO investigators). Building on previous findings that RASSO investigators were overworked, under-resourced, and unsupported in their wellbeing and professional development (Gov.UK, 2022), this further study sought to explore the existing data further to better understand the pathways through which organisational conditions contribute to officer stress, presenteeism and burnout; to move beyond defining the problem statement towards more actionable understandings.

Operation Soteria was a UK Home Office funded programme designed to improve the investigation of rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) in England and Wales. It was a unique project underpinned by rigorous social science. With multidisciplinary academics across multiple universities, the study applied mixed qualitative and quantitative methods to a six-pillar approach to organisational change within police forces, strengthening specialist decision-making in RASSO cases. The research informed policing practice and government policy, and it informed a national change. These research-informed pillars pinpoint specific areas for improvement which informed the new framework for investigating RASSO: (1) suspect-focused investigations; (2) disrupting repeat suspects; (3) victim engagement as procedural justice; (4) promoting better learning, development and wellbeing for police officers; (5) using data more effectively in RASSO investigations; and (6) using digital material and technology in RASSO investigations. The Pathfinder project, which started in 2021, was originally based in Avon and Somerset Constabulary.

This secondary analysis for Pillar 4, the focus of this report, was undertaken with oversight and guidance of an expert Advisory Group. The group met five times

across the funding period and, in addition to the core research team, comprised eight colleagues from the College of Policing, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), the National Centre for Violence Against Women and Girls, and two academics with expertise in policing research. We would note our gratitude for their support and guidance throughout this project.

Introduction

This secondary analysis examined data originally collected under the auspices of Operation Soteria (2021 - 2024). The survey data informing this report were collected between 2023-2024, which remains the most up-to-date data available on surveying RASSO investigator wellbeing. Any investigator involved in a RASSO investigation, including frontline response officers (FRO), generalist and specialist secondary police, and civilian investigators, was eligible to participate in the study. The original analysis was shaped by programme research aims and timescales, which necessarily limited it to meeting programme goals. This report sets out the findings from the expanded secondary analysis of the data described above.

The initial quantitative analysis presented at the conclusion of Operation Soteria highlighted the high levels of burnout experienced by RASSO investigators. Whilst this finding was important it provided limited insight into the mechanisms that created burnout , or whether there were differential factors that affected different RASSO investigator cohorts. This secondary analysis therefore aimed to deepen understanding of barriers to positive workplace wellbeing; the relationship between organisational demands and officer wellbeing; the role of learning and development in supporting professional competence; how RASSO investigators move from engagement to burnout; and the interaction between organisational conditions and victim-centred policing practices.

Operation Soteria's original Pillar 4 research identified significant concerns regarding learning, development and wellbeing among investigators involved in

the investigation of rape and serious sexual offences. RASSO investigators perceived training attendance as an abstraction from operational duties, and as representing a conflict with their responsibilities towards victims, colleagues, and workloads, rather than an investment in continuing professional development. High perceived workloads, limited resources, and perceived organisational indifference contributed to reduced wellbeing, increased ill health, and higher levels of presenteeism.

Importantly, RASSO investigators repeatedly and consistently reported prioritising victim-survivors and supporting colleagues over their own health and wellbeing. Many were unwilling to take sickness absence due to concerns about letting victims down and increasing the burden on already overstretched colleagues. An adjacent driver for such behaviours was fear that workloads would go untouched during sickness or leave related absences. Our intention for the secondary analysis was to find theoretical and methodological underpinnings to support our findings and to create a model to test for further research purposes. We outline our process and conclusions below.

Theoretical Framework

The study was informed by four complementary theoretical perspectives: Maslach's burnout framework, hindrance stress, institutional logics, and the Job-Demands-Resources (JD-R) model. These four approaches sequentially informed a staged process of analysing the data using quantitative methods and exploring the nuances of these findings with qualitative methods.

Maslach's Burnout Framework

Maslach conceptualises burnout as a progressive process characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation or disengagement and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, 2003; 2017). These stages are reached as individuals have a lack of control over their workplace and organisational

demands. Based on the primary data collection from the original study, the research team wanted to extend their exploration by employing Maslach's more nuanced five-point model to underpin responses to the wellbeing survey (Leiter and Maslach, 2016). The five stages on the continuum to burnout are: 1) Engaged (positive responses); 2) Ineffective (professional efficacy); 3) Overextended (emotional exhaustion); 4) Disengaged (depersonalisation); and 5) Burnout.

Challenge-Hindrance Stress Model

The Challenge-Hindrance Stress Model (CHS) is widely accepted by academics and practitioners as a useful explanatory model. It groups workplace stressors into two categories: hindrance stressors, the appraisal of which interfere with performance or goals, and challenge stressors, the appraisal of which contribute to performance (Horan et al., 2020). To fully account for our findings, we adopt Tuckey *et al.*'s (2015) approach as a critical lens through which to better understand our qualitative and quantitative findings. They introduce the idea of threat work stressors as a third factor in the CHM model, which they define as 'work-related demands or circumstances that tend to be directly associated with personal harm or loss, as a category distinct from challenge and hindrance stressors' (*Ibid*, 133). In this model, 'challenge appraisals are positively related to positive affect, threat appraisals are positively associated with anxiety and anger, and hindrance appraisals are positively associated with fatigue' (Horan *et al.*, 2020, 5).

Job Demands-Resources Model

The findings are also interpreted through organisational theories relating to occupational culture and "greedy organisations", where employees internalise expectations of self-sacrifice and place organisational goals above staff members' own wellbeing. These perspectives help explain why presenteeism (working whilst unwell) becomes normalised despite high personal costs. The Job Demands-Resources Model [JD-R] (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007) suggests that there is a psychological cost to sustained excessive workload, including high

levels of stress and burnout. The JD-R theory suggests high workloads and low resources can manifest through increased levels of sickness and stress, whilst organisational support can act as a buffer to these outcomes.

Institutional Logics

Institutional logics suggest that practices, symbolism and assumptions, based on our values and beliefs, shape our actions, culture and interpretations of social reality (Oliveria Dias *et al*., 2025). The concept can explain how investigators' personal perceptions and beliefs may conflict with workplace operating environments. Examples of such conflicts might arise in the disconnect between organisational actions and individual agency (e.g., whether to miss a family event (interpersonal) to meet a workplace demand (professional) or failing to get a suspect charged (personal motivation) as a result of the effects of organisational systems (professional)).

Study Design

The project received Ethical approval from Anglia Ruskin University's Research Ethics Committee [ETH2425-6046].

<u>Quantitative Methodology</u>

Our quantitative analysis incorporated four approaches: 1) mediation/moderation modelling via Generalised Structural Equation Modelling (GSEM), 2) likelihood of being in different groupings via Proportional Odds analysis (PO), 3) exploration of emergent segmentation within investigator population via Hierarchical Clustering, 4) the impact of large-scale organisational effects via Macro Analyses of fixed-effects (FE) linear regression models.

Applying these approaches, we undertook four complementary analyses to examine burnout and wellbeing among RASSO investigators in England and Wales as part of Operation Soteria. Our first model deployed GSEM on n=2,204 investigator responses to examine associations among workload manageability, stress-related ill-health, presenteeism, victim-centred practice and burnout

severity. The second model applied hierarchical cluster analysis (Ward's Cluster) to the same sample and identified three empirically derived wellbeing profiles. The third model segmented the workforce using Leiter and Maslach (2016) five-category framework and employed proportional odds (PO) regression to identify factors associated with disengagement and burnout. The fourth model examined whether the investigator-level patterns translated into organisational outcomes; we conducted a longitudinal force-level analysis using police force panel data from 2016-2024. Fixed-effects models examined whether changes in workforce composition, sickness absence, and workforce wellbeing were associated with variation in charge outcomes, no-suspect RASSO case closures, and recorded rape offences.

Qualitative methodology

Qualitative data were integrated using Fetters et al.'s (2013) convergent design methodologies: n=458 open-ended survey responses were analysed and then mapped independently and against quantitative findings. NVivo software supported the creation of themes and sub-themes emerging through thematic coding, which underwent three stages of refinement. Inter-rater agreement took place with the research team, and interim findings were shared and feedback received at Advisory Board meetings. Participants' responses are coded via a random, numerical system to ensure anonymity.

The qualitative analysis sought to better understand perceived barriers to a positive working environment related to training, the learning culture, and the salience of organisational health policies. Additionally, we examined how work demands affect work-life balance, perceptions of individual goal disengagement, and the overall effect on officer wellbeing.

The survey free text analysis were reanalysed to create themes within the Pillar 4 focus on learning, development and wellbeing. Following Maslach's burnout

inventory as the theoretical basis of the project, we reviewed the qualitative findings using the five stages from wellness to burnout: 1) Engaged – positive on exhaustion and efficacy 2) Ineffective – negative on efficacy 3) Overextended – negative on emotional exhaustion 4) Disengaged – positive on depersonalisation; and 5) Burnout – position of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and lack of personal accomplishment.

We reviewed the free-text survey responses to identify any links affecting officers' day-to-day work. Themes included: supporting victims regardless of the outcome and disengagement; working with victim-survivors to support investigations, knowing the issues of delays and difficulties within the criminal justice system and the subsequent large attrition rate; and pressure to work while ill and self-driven stress.

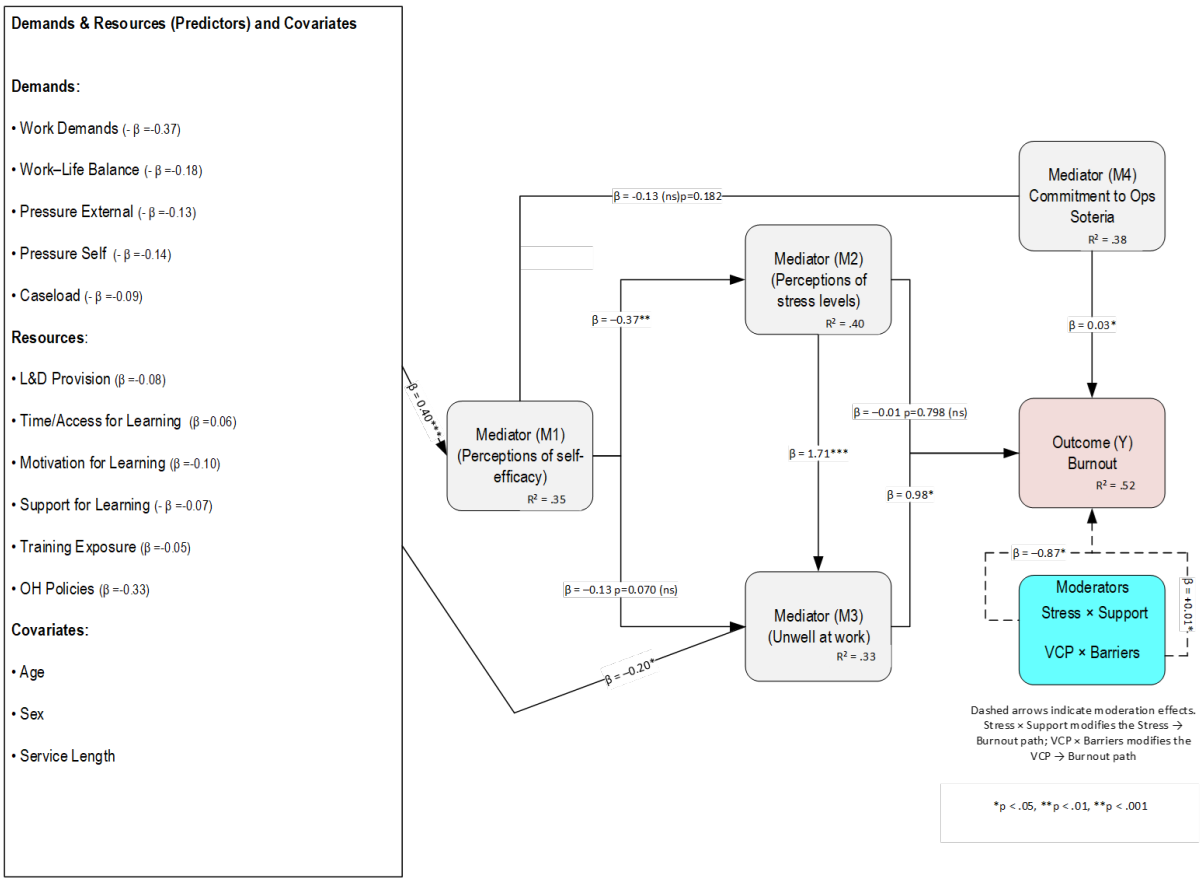
Key Findings

Key Finding 1: The Primacy of Workload Perceived Manageability Over Volume

Across all analyses, a consistent pattern emerged: stress-related ill-health was not driven by caseload volume per se, but by RASSO investigators' perceptions of both workload and available time and resources. In our GSEM model, each 1-unit increase in perceived workload manageability (whether an investigator perceives they could manage their workload) reduced the odds of stress by 31% (Odds Ratio [OR]=0.69). Role-specific analyses confirmed that this relationship held across all operational contexts (specialist investigators, generalists, and response officers all showed equivalent stress-workload associations). The cluster analysis similarly showed that the lowest-burnout profile ("Organisationally Supported," 55.3% of the sample, 1% burned out) reported relatively high work demands yet substantially lower stress and presenteeism. This finding challenges a commonly heard reductive narrative that blames burnout on "too many cases." Instead, our working explanatory hypothesis is that burnout reflects the gap between demands and the organisational conditions that enable their management (see the factors in

Figure 1 below). From a JD-R perspective, the evidence suggests that organisational capacity (e.g., staffing, time allocation, administrative burden) matters more than caseload volume alone.

Figure 1- demands and resources predictors



Investigators described significant frustration arising from delays across the criminal justice system, evidential thresholds, and administrative burdens. These issues reduced opportunities to achieve meaningful outcomes for victim-survivors and reinforced perceptions of inefficiency and personal and professional inefficacy.

> *'We signed up for the job as we care about victims, bringing offenders to justice and positive outcomes, however the demand and resources available mean we are unable to fulfil this, leaving us feeling depleted, helpless and disappointed in the police service as a whole'* [P297]

> *"Unfortunately much of our time spent as investigators gets put into investigating matters that are clearly not going to reach the point of a conviction"* (Survey, P423).

3) Why This Matters: The Resilience Paradox

A key finding across the analyses is that the largest workforce segment (55.3%) which we define as 'Organisationally Supported' reported very low burnout rates (1%) despite operating with substantial work demands. This rate is compared with 20-22% for two other clusters ('Burned Out, Specialist Detectives' and 'Younger, Burned Out and Under-Resourced'). We suggest that this is a more nuanced perspective than the initial analysis conducted under Operation Soteria, which suggested high levels of burnout across RASSO investigator cohorts. This was not because of an absence of stressors; this profile was characterised by stronger perceived organisational resources, more favourable perceptions of leadership support, better access to learning and development, and lower levels of presenteeism. We argue that this finding has important implications. High demands and positive wellbeing were not mutually exclusive. This challenges the assumption that burnout is an inevitable consequence of exposure to difficult, traumatic work. Instead, our findings suggest organisational conditions influence whether demanding work is rendered sustainable or indeed harmful. The practical question for policing is therefore not simply how to reduce demand, but what resources enable some investigators to remain psychologically healthy while undertaking the same type and volumes of work and caseload.

> *'I do really enjoy my role as an investigator. I like building the case files and I do think the EA process works really well and the shift away from a focus on the victim back to the offender feels long overdue'* [P119]

> *'I love investigating rape and get great satisfaction from it. I have a great team who work exceptionally hard'* [P166]

'I love my job, I love convicting dangerous offenders and supporting the most vulnerable of victims through the prosecution and court process' [P169]

Key Finding 2: The "Presenteeism Trap" as a Behavioural Amplifier of Burnout Risk

Our GSEM model identified presenteeism (attending work while assessing themselves as too unwell to do so) as the strongest correlate of burnout severity (Odds Ratio [OR]=2.68). Among investigators reporting stress-related ill-health, odds of presenteeism were 5.58 times higher. Critically, of those who reported attending work whilst unwell, 97.4% reported self-imposed pressure, compared with only 33.2% reporting external (managerial or colleague) pressure. This suggests a "presenteeism trap" experienced as a personal obligation (framed through professional commitment to victims and colleagues as well as fear of the consequences of "dropping the ball") rather than coercion. Our qualitative analysis reinforced this: officers described attending while unwell as "normal" or "expected," yet this normalisation is, in part, embedded in victim-centred practice (e.g., attitudes, policies, and cultures) that makes absence feel impossibly burdensome. From a prevention standpoint, presenteeism represents a modifiable behavioural pathway. When presenteeism remains high despite formal wellbeing policies, those policies likely address symptoms rather than the root causes (workload, staffing, recovery opportunities).

Vignette: Recovery as the Missing Organisational Resource

Across our models, recovery (which we define as recovery from illness and ill-health, including work-related exhaustion and other symptoms) emerged as an important but often overlooked theme. Investigators reporting stress-related ill-health frequently continued working despite illness, while qualitative accounts consistently described difficulties disengaging from work psychologically and practically. Although recovery was not measured directly, the convergence of our findings on work-life balance, presenteeism, workload manageability, and burnout suggests that opportunities for recovery may be a critical organisational resource. Burnout, viewed through this lens, appears less a consequence of

acute pressure than of prolonged exposure to demands without sufficient opportunities for restoration. This interpretation is consistent with the broader JD-R framework, where demands become problematic when recovery and replenishment are constrained over time. In this context, the recovery and replenishment opportunities constitute critical resources for balancing the JD-R calculation.

> '*We simply do not have enough staff for the demand and the impact on officer wellbeing is that we are slowly breaking ourselves down for the benefit of the communities we serve'* [P297]

> *'There is absolutely no way that any officer can go home and switch off with the amount of work and pressure that we have'* [P276]

Key Finding 3. Specialist, Mid-Career Vulnerability and Cumulative Stress

Both the GSEM and proportional odds (PO) analyses identified officers with 10–20 years' service as significantly more vulnerable to burnout (ORs 1.23-2.63). The cluster analysis further identified a group, "Burned Out, Specialist Detectives", comprised of predominantly experienced investigators (mean age 40.2 years, 63% with 10+ years' service) concentrated in specialist RASSO units. We hypothesise that this mid-career specialist role burnout pattern reflects either cumulative exposure to traumatic material and/or organisational environments and constraints over time, or selection effects whereby experienced, skilled investigators are retained in the most demanding specialist roles (Walley *et al.*, 2024). Our person-centred analysis hints at the latter: specialist expertise is both a product of professional career choice and personal motivation towards a particular area of policing. These factors entrench investigators in complex, emotionally demanding cases whilst reducing the availability of suitably qualified and skilled cover to provide support when required. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle, without resources being able to flex in and out of the investigative team to manage demand fluctuations (both volume and complexity). The finding has implications for strategic workforce planning both locally and centrally: growing specialist RASSO investigative capacity as required in current

government proposals may inadvertently concentrate burnout risk among the very investigators most needed for high-quality, victim-focused investigations.

> *'Sickness in my department has increased because people are burnout and their immune systems are suffering. People are regularly working an extra two days a month as overtime to get files in and aren't getting sufficient rest. The pressure put on officers regarding the timeliness of files is off the charts and because of this a number of experienced detectives are leaving'* [P324]

> *'Dealing with victims of rape and then suspects of rape is mentally and personally draining. It is very hard to sit and question a stranger about sexual content and it draws upon a significant amount of my personal resilience daily [...] This wouldn't be so bad if it was a one-off crime, but we don't deal with any other crime other than rape so it is a constant drain upon us to keep going'* [P431]

Key Finding 4. The Victim-Centred Practice–Barrier Interaction and Value Dissonance

Our models established the concept of victim-centred practice orientation which comprised two constructs: the desire to disrupt offending (e.g. securing charges/convictions) and the need to provide empathic support to victim-survivors. We argue this is the 'institutional logic' of the emergent RASSO model, as demonstrated in the three principles underpinning the National Operating Model's (NOM) three core principles: context-led, victim-centred, and suspect-focused investigations. Here we hypothesise that investigator's individual victim-centred practice to 'do the right thing by their victims' and get offenders 'charged and convicted' (both common personal and organisational success measures) combine. The GSEM model showed that this victim-centred practice orientation was contingent on organisational barriers: the victim-centred practice-burnout relationship varied significantly with perceived investigative barriers (interaction p=.019). Officers with stronger victim-focused values who encountered high organisational barriers experienced elevated burnout.

Qualitative data illuminated the mechanism: investigators reported profound frustration not from victim engagement itself or any associated vicarious or secondary trauma associated with these engagements, but from organisational constraints (e.g. workload demands, delays, resource shortages such as staffing or recruitment problems). This prevented them from delivering the standard of victim care they regarded as professionally and ethically necessary. Contextually, the charge and conviction rates for RASSO are, and have been historically, low, creating an additional gap between desire and investigator's capacity to meet it. This represents a value dissonance: a gap between professional identity and value-centred practice and organisational reality. Our PO analysis reinforced this: reduced willingness to "go the extra mile" with victims and negative attitudes towards specialist training strongly predicted disengagement and burnout. We have previously posited that Conservation of Resources (COR) theory may explain this pattern: when organisational demands deplete valued resources (e.g., time, capability, professional autonomy), officers may cognitively compensate by devaluing the source of frustration and victim engagement itself (Maguire & Sondhi, 2023). We have developed this line of inquiry to suggest that this adaptive response to dissonance becomes maladaptive when it erodes investigative quality, victim experience, and investigator wellbeing.

> '*I am letting my victims down and cases are taking so long to get to pre-charge, let alone through court. That affects me more than anything'* [P280]

> *'Victims have a great service on the day they first report however this quickly declines due to demand and they just become another number on our workload which is not at all what we want as investigators and people who care about others. I feel that I am letting victims down, despite doing everything I possibly can with the hours in the day'* [P297]

<u>Key Finding 5. Organisational Support Shows Modest Direct Effects but Meaningful Moderation</u>

Our GSEM model found that organisational wellbeing support showed minimal moderation of the stress-burnout relationship: predicted burnout varied only marginally (2.08–2.11) across support levels, despite statistical significance. We hypothesise that this counterintuitive finding is clinically important: generic wellbeing policies which might lack personal or situational salience appear insufficient to buffer burnout when underlying resource (e.g., workload and staffing) pressures remain unaddressed. However, our person-centred analyses suggested a more nuanced picture. The "Organisationally Supported" cluster (55.3% of the sample) reported substantially better outcomes not despite high demands, but because of stronger perceptions of organisational resource availability and salience: a better learning environment, more supportive supervision, accessible training, and credible/salient health policies. The key distinction is between perceived support (often generic) and structural support (embodied in learning climate, leadership quality, and recovery opportunities). Investigators in the resilient cluster perceived their organisations as investing in learning and development (concrete, operationalised resources rather than abstract policies). We suggest this distinction between generic and structural support may be important. Investigators frequently acknowledged the existence of formal wellbeing initiatives whilst simultaneously questioning their practical value underlying workload pressures remained unchanged and unaddressed. Our findings therefore suggest that support is most effective when it is situationally salient and embedded within everyday working conditions rather than delivered as a discrete wellbeing intervention. In practice, this means factors such as protected learning time, good supervision, adjustable workloads, reflective practice, and opportunities for recovery may be more influential than standalone wellbeing programmes. The findings therefore suggest that organisations should view wellbeing as an outcome of organisational design rather than as something offered to individuals after problems emerge. Our moderation analyses also showed that organisational support was more effective for those already experiencing elevated stress (Cluster 1), suggesting that support may protect those most vulnerable, even if it does not prevent burnout entirely when the delta between investigators' perceptions of demand and resources remains high.

'Look after your student officers, treat them like gold dust, they are filling up the empty vacancies and easing others' workloads. Care for them, train them up as they care and they are passionate [...] Retrain officers who have been in the force for a long time, as it's not the new students coming through who are the ones to look at, it's the old serving officers whose attitudes and training need to be updated' [P243]

'Not once has my organisation checked on how this work is affecting my welfare or mental health. No courses have been offered to me, designed to help with resilience or cope with the stress and anxiety felt daily. I have been offered no break from this work. I cannot say no' [P147]

Vignette: Burnout Does Not Easily Translate into Force-Level Performance Indicators

A complementary macro-level analysis examined whether workforce composition, sickness absence, and workforce wellbeing were associated with force-level investigative outcomes between 2016 and 2024. Once force-specific and year-specific effects were controlled for, workforce variables showed little consistent association with charge outcomes, no-suspect case closures, or recorded rape offences. Instead, common system-wide temporal influences explained a substantial proportion of the observed variation. While this finding may initially appear inconsistent with the investigator-level analyses, we hypothesise that it may reflect the difficulty of detecting workforce wellbeing effects using aggregated force-level data and/or the inability of current approaches to wellbeing to exert influence over such outcomes, particularly in circumstances where investigators are incentivised to mask or attenuate wellbeing effects. Burnout may affect investigative quality, victim engagement, retention, and day-to-day practice in ways that are not readily captured by widely used force-level outcome measures. We therefore suggest caution when evaluating workforce wellbeing solely through organisational performance indicators.

Key Finding 6. Dissociation as a Burnout 'Signature'

An important, consistent finding across the studies is the erosion of victim-focused attitudes as burnout progresses. The PO analysis showed that reduced aspiration to persuade victims to continue investigations (OR=1.17) and weakening engagement with victim care (OR=1.08) predicted higher disengagement–burnout. The qualitative data did not frame this as antipathy towards victims-survivors but rather as protective disengagement (officers described detachment as a survival mechanism when they felt unable to deliver adequate care or meet organisational performance measures). Our cluster model similarly showed 'Burned-Out' profiles reporting more variable perceived professional capability (ranging from mean 3.02 in Cluster 3 to 3.99 in Cluster 1 on a 5-point scale) and involvement in specialist RASSO work (12% in Cluster 3 vs 57% in Cluster 1). This suggests that the factors underlying burnout in these groups require differential consideration. We posit that this dissociation may represent a Catch-22: investigators retreat from victim-facing work precisely because burnout has depleted their emotional resources, yet this retreat further erodes the victim-centred practice that might otherwise sustain engagement, thus increasing conflict with their value-centred practice. We suggest that preventing this disengagement requires not only individual-level support but also organisational conditions that enable officers to enact and embody their personal and professional values and motivations.

> *'I rarely leave work feeling like I've had a good day or enjoyed what I've done. I find I try and distract myself from workload wherever possible, which isn't helpful, but it is easier than facing it sometimes'* [P280]

> *'Daily we hope that the phone doesn't ring or social services do not call because we know we are either going to push an already under pressure detective to breaking point or we do not physically have any detectives to give*' [P323]

Conclusion

The analyses collectively support a refined JD-R framework, enriched by emotional labour theory, the art of managing one's feelings and body language to meet job demands (Green, 2025), and challenge–hindrance–threat (CHT) stressor mechanisms. In conclusion, the theoretical implications, in conjunction with the data, can be interpreted as follows:

Job Demands are experienced as hindrances (obstacles to effective practice and VCP-congruent outcomes) rather than challenges (meaningful, positive difficulty), particularly when organisational barriers (rather than case complexity) are the main barriers to effective practice and VCP congruity.

High job demands coupled with hindrances may lead to perceptions of threat arising from personal failure to meet value-centred practice expectations, sanction for such performance failures, or more general investigative or victim-related expectations.

Job Resources operate at multiple levels: individual (professional capability, training), interpersonal (supervision, peer support), and organisational (learning climate, staffing, recovery time). Their relative absence predicts burnout more than demands alone. Institutional Logics (how people in an organisation perceive its core business) define perceptions of victim-centred practice.

Emotional labour constitutes a specific component of job demands that becomes particularly consequential when officers cannot express authentic engagement with victims due to workload or organisational constraints. Behavioural responses (presenteeism, value dissonance, dissociation) represent adaptive mechanisms under chronic strain that may amplify burnout risk and erode practice quality.

Practical recommendations

Based on our findings, we offer the following recommendations:

Workforce Planning: The mandated specialist RASSO capacity underpinning the emergent NOM needs to address underlying risks in workload manageability and recovery infrastructure that concentrate burnout among experienced investigators and erode investigative quality over the long term. In addition to recognising investigator capacity, a strategic understanding of demand management to build competence and capability is required.

Staffing and Workload: Caseload is not a reliable measure of burnout risk, and therefore reductions alone are unlikely to address burnout; perceived manageability (time availability, administrative burden, case complexity relative to available resources and the ability to understand through the correct learning resources), combined with actual demand/resource modelling, should be the metric guiding workload policy.

Creation of a Prevention Architecture: Early intervention targeting presenteeism (through structured (non-punitive) absence protocols, recovery expectation-setting, and workload adjustment mechanisms such as 'Pause Point', a reflective practice strategy for officer wellbeing) may prevent progression through the 'burnout cascade' (Weber and Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000) more effectively than late-stage generic wellbeing initiatives.

Learning Environments as Infrastructure: The consistency with which learning climate, supervisory quality, and development opportunities predict resilience across all analyses suggests these should be considered foundational wellbeing infrastructure, not optional enhancement. Credible, salient, operationalised learning support proved more protective than generic health policies. This also suggests leaders need to understand workforce health (for example, through health assessments).

Accountability for Organisational Conditions: The modest direct effects of individual-level wellbeing support, combined with strong associations between organisational barriers and burnout, suggest accountability should take significantly more account of the effects of organisational systems and structures

in enabling sustainable practice, not merely focussing on individuals and their 'resilience.'

Burnout among RASSO investigators emerges not from exposure to demanding work alone, but from a dynamic interplay of perceived workload manageability, organisational resources, behavioural responses to stressful conditions, and investigators' capacity to enact victim-centred practice under deeply constrained conditions. We hypothesise that our analyses converge on a conclusion that challenges dominant narratives in finding that burnout is fundamentally an organisational and implementation issue, not primarily an individual or even occupational hazard issue. Addressing it therefore depends far less on heroic individual resilience than on creating sustainable, structurally embedded systems within organisational settings that deliver capacity planning, learning infrastructure, recovery architecture, and alignment between value-centred practice and organisational design.

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Appendices