



Published August 2026

Burnout, post-traumatic growth, and organisational support in police officers working in specialist units

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Executive Summary

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of nine police officers working in specialist roles within the UK. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study examined participants' experiences of the psychological impact of their work, coping strategies, organisational support, and post-traumatic growth.

Findings highlight that participants experienced the effects of the work as inevitable, describing emotional exhaustion, hypervigilance, altered views of the world, and difficulties disconnecting from work outside of working hours. Participants also described the development of coping strategies, including emotional detachment, compartmentalisation, humour, and reliance on peer support.

At the same time, participants reflected on experiences of personal growth, increased self-awareness, strengthened relationships, and a sense of meaning and responsibility connected to their work. Peer support and organisational culture emerged as important factors influencing wellbeing and coping.

The findings highlight the importance of psychologically informed workplace cultures, proactive wellbeing support, and organisational approaches that promote compassion and resilience among police officers working with distressing material.

“ Peer support and organisational culture emerged as important factors influencing wellbeing and coping. ”

Why this matters now

- Recent years have marked an increase in both the volume and intensity of distressing material encountered within specialist roles (**National Crime Agency, 2026**). At the same time, sickness absences and staff turnover linked to poor psychological health and stress have increased across policing (**Cartwright & Roach, 2021**).
- Despite routine exposure to highly graphic and disturbing material, forensic science practitioners remain underrepresented within research, wellbeing initiatives, and organisational discussions around psychological risk.
- As pressures on specialist units continue to grow, understanding how officers experience, manage, and make sense of this work is increasingly important for informing wellbeing support, staff retention, and sustainable workforce practices.

Key findings



Psychological impact is inevitable

Participants described the psychological impact of exposure to distressing material as "inevitable", with effects extending beyond work into relationships, emotional wellbeing, and everyday life. Experiences included hypervigilance, emotional detachment, cynicism, and altered views of the world and other people.



Coping strategies develop over time

Coping strategies included compartmentalisation, humour, desensitisation, and maintaining separation between work and personal life. Humour was experienced as a way of lightening the reality of the difficult material, while desensitisation was described as a "callus" around distressing material over time.



Post-traumatic growth is possible

Participants also reflected on experiences of post-traumatic growth, including increased self-awareness, appreciation of life, strengthened relationships, compassion, and a sense that their work is "worthwhile" and "making a difference".



Peer support and organisational culture matter

Peer relationships emerged as one of the most important protective factors in specialist units. Colleagues were described as a source of mutual understanding, emotional support, validation, and shared experience due to the unique nature of the work.

Key figures



9 Police officers in specialist roles participated in the study.



4 Key themes identified: impact of work, coping strategies, post-traumatic growth, organisational support.



ALL participants highlighted peer support as a crucial protective factor.

Context / Background

Repeated exposure to distressing material is part of everyday work for police officers in specialist units, such as digital forensics and forensic scene investigation.

Recent years have marked an increase in both the volume and intensity of this material (National Crime Agency, 2026), with potential psychological and physical effects extending beyond working hours and into officers' personal lives.

Despite routine exposure to distressing material, specialist units often lack resources and psychologically informed support, and research in this area remains limited.

Recommendations

1



Recruitment and selection processes

The findings highlight the importance of identifying individuals who may be better equipped to manage repeated exposure to distressing material. Individuals who demonstrate adaptive coping strategies, strong social support networks, psychological mindedness, and an ability to maintain boundaries between work and personal life may be better suited to specialist roles.

Consideration may also be given to the use of psychometrics within recruitment and selection processes.

2



Induction and ongoing training

Training should extend beyond technical skills and include psychoeducation regarding burnout, secondary traumatic stress, vicarious traumatisation, and recognition of signs of psychological distress. Training should also promote both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies.

Opportunities for wellbeing-focused training and self-development should continue throughout officers' careers. Supervisors should also receive additional training around safeguarding employee wellbeing, including mental health awareness, supervision skills, and psychologically informed debriefing approaches.

3



Peer support and reflective spaces

Organisations should recognise and strengthen the role of peer support within specialist units by facilitating psychologically safe communication, reflective spaces, regular debriefing opportunities, and supportive team cultures.

Regular opportunities for decompression, reflection, and access to skilled psychological support may help officers process emotional experiences more effectively, and reduce longer-term psychological distress.

4



Psychologically safe and compassionate workplace cultures

Organisations and supervisors should promote workplace cultures that normalise mental health difficulties associated with repeated exposure to distressing material and encourage open conversations around wellbeing.

A compassionate and collaborative response to psychological difficulties, alongside a "zero tolerance" approach towards stigma and invalidation, may improve help-seeking, reduce isolation, and support long-term wellbeing and staff retention.

Methodology

We conducted semi-structured interviews with nine police officers working in specialist roles within one UK police force, including digital forensics analysts and forensic scene investigators. Interviews explored experiences of psychological impact, coping, organisational support, and post-traumatic growth. Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Study considerations

These recommendations are informed by in-depth interviews with nine police officers working in specialist roles within one UK police force. While the findings provide rich insight into participants' lived experiences, they may not be generalisable to police officers in specialist roles across other UK police forces, and should therefore be considered with this limitation in mind, as well as alongside the wider evidence base.

Conclusion and next steps

Future policy and practice should prioritise psychologically informed workplace cultures, proactive wellbeing training, peer support structures, and trauma-informed interventions to support long-term wellbeing, resilience, and staff retention.

A proactive, compassionate, and evidence-informed approach is essential to supporting those who support others.

“ Police officers working in specialist roles experience both the psychological impact and potential personal growth associated with repeated exposure to distressing material. ”

References

- National Crime Agency. (2026).
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Funding statement

This study received no external funding. It was conducted as part of a doctoral thesis during a professional doctorate in Forensic Clinical Psychology.