Science & Technology in Policing

POLICE STAR FUND 24/25

IMPROVING REPRESENTATION AND INCLUSION IN SERIOUS ORGANISED CRIME POLICING ROLES

Summary

The NPCC SOC Portfolio, collaborating with the University of Portsmouth and four forces, developed a mature understanding of diversity, embracing surface-level characteristics and expanding our understanding of hidden-level diversity. This provided an evidence-base to define and remove unknown barriers, innovative approaches to attraction, recruitment and retention and greater representation/inclusion.

Organisations

NPCC SOC Portfolio, University of Portsmouth, Greater Manchester Police, Essex Police, Gwent Police, Devon and Cornwall Police

Challenge

Police organisations have committed to becoming more representative of the increasingly diverse communities they serve. However, despite sustained and multi-seated initiatives to increase representation of established diversity characteristics, diversity is patchy within policing, concentrating on surface-level diversity characteristics does not enhance diversity and equality and the challenges are more acute in specialist roles.

Innovation or research

This research investigates the enablers and deterrents of moving into SOC roles and provides evidence of the perceptions of inclusivity of SOC teams. Employing a sequential mixed-methods design - including a Rapid Evidence Assessment, 74 semi-structured interviews, and an online survey of 510 respondents across four host forces - the research explores both surface-level diversity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age) and deep-level diversity (e.g., values, personality, cognitive styles). The literature examined as part of the Rapid Evidence Assessment suggested that effective leadership is crucial for encouraging diversity in policing, challenging barriers to inclusion and driving cultural change. While diversity can enhance perceptions of legitimacy, its impact on performance depends on organisational context, requiring a focus on inclusive cultures over numerical representation.

Findings

Perceptions vs. experiences: external perceptions frequently depict SOC as an elitist, male-dominated, and inflexible environment with long working hours and limited support for childcare. In contrast, SOC personnel report significant flexibility, strong team dynamics, high autonomy, and an accommodating work-life balance, challenging prevalent stereotypes. There are some limits to flexibility but SOC personnel described receptive and understanding teams.

Recruitment and progression: pathways into SOC differ markedly between officers and staff. Officers must strategically build professional networks and accumulate investigative experience, whereas staff are recruited for specific skills such as research and analysis. Recruitment processes are seen as opaque and reliant on informal referrals, restricting access and perpetuating barriers to entry - especially for candidates from diverse backgrounds. SOC officers face a trade-off between specialising in SOC and pursuing promotions, while police staff express concerns over limited progression opportunities. Despite these challenges, high levels of job satisfaction are reported, largely due to the supportive team environment and varied work responsibilities.

Managing inclusion and diversity: there is a growing recognition of the need to incorporate deeper dimensions of diversity. Leadership is identified as crucial in driving cultural change and fostering an inclusive environment. However, some concerns persist that diversity efforts may be perceived as mere image management, potentially undermining meritocracy and fairness.

Overall, while SOC has made strides in visible diversity and offers a supportive, flexible environment, persistent structural and cultural barriers in recruitment and progression demand clear leadership to champion truly inclusive working environments and transparent, fair hiring practices.

Next steps

The Project Drawbridge team have outlined five strategic priorities to enhance diversity, equity and inclusion within SOC roles and are continuing to work with policing on the implementation of these recommendations:

A. Clear and unambiguous leadership on diversity, equity and inclusion.

B. Better understanding of profiles of existing officers and staff within Serious and Organised Crime roles.

C. Greater internal and external awareness of roles, opportunities and working practices within Serious and Organised Crime.

D. Inclusive-friendly recruitment strategies to increase diversity of candidates applying to Serious and Organised Crime roles.

E. Transparency of recruitment into and within Serious and Organised Crime roles.