

# Re-thinking learning and development and well-being in the policing of rape: Insights from a rapid review of comparable public-service occupations

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## ABSTRACT

Research within Operation Soteria Bluestone (OSB) has highlighted a number of challenges within learning and development for officers who investigate rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO). Moreover, one neglected area has been the relationship between learning and development and officer well-being. This article is based on a rapid review of 3,673 English-language titles that aimed to examine ‘best practice’ learning and development in the RASSO field. Using a combination of electronic and hand-searching methods, 52 titles were identified and subject to a full-text review. Three broad themes were identified and highlight the importance of: (1) considering which specialist knowledge and skills to develop; (2) encouraging active and reflective learners; and (3) measuring the impact of learning and development. The findings suggest there is much to learn from comparable, public-service occupations which can usefully inform and shape the re-design of certain elements of specialist RASSO training.

## INTRODUCTION

Myriad concerns exist in relation to contemporary policing in the UK and beyond. Two key, and up to now largely separate concerns, have been issues related to the learning and development of officers and their well-being. Arguably, these concerns are magnified in the investigation of rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) given both the complexity of these crimes and their effects on victim-survivors.

In relation to learning and development, a review of the high attrition and low conviction rates in rape cases (Home Office, 2021) has revealed a need for both capacity and capability-building within the police forces of England and Wales. The police uplift programme—launched in 2019—aims to recruit 20,000 new staff over a 5-year period. Given much impetus by the Neyroud (2011) review of police leadership and training, a professionalization agenda has come relatively late to policing compared with nursing, paramedicine, teaching, and social work—public-service occupations which are comparable in that they are practical, knowledge-based, and require strong interpersonal skills (White and Heslop, 2012). A key aspect of professionalization has been the introduction of degree-level entry overseen by the College of Policing (CoP) as a regulatory body, along with other novel detective entry pathways (see Hunter and May, 2019). Post-entry training, however, tends to be in-house and delivered by police practitioners. A review commissioned

following the rape and murder of a young woman by a serving Metropolitan police officer (Casey, 2023) found evidence of a weak approach to learning and development within the force, manifested in poor training records and the frequent cancellation of training due to operational demands. This meant that officers were being deployed without the necessary skills and mandatory training. Indeed, while RASSO investigators in the UK are required to have completed the CoP’s designed and licensed Specialist Sexual Assault Investigation Development Programme (SSAIDP) research has identified that this is often not the case (see Williams *et al.*, 2022).

In relation to well-being, there has been a long-standing examination of the ways in which police work affect officers on a psycho-emotional level. Of particular concern are those features of the workplace that can elicit stress and which are related to the management and structure of the organization. These ‘organizational stressors’—including lack of support, job pressure, and workload—are significantly associated with poorer well-being and mental health outcomes for police officers (Purba and Demou, 2019). However, well-being is unlikely to be a ‘homogenous entity’ (Cartwright and Roach, 2022, p. 112), given it is to some extent contingent on the police employee’s specific roles and responsibilities. Although research on the well-being of RASSO officers has been largely neglected, the results of a recent online survey in one English police force revealed that the

majority of respondents (63%) had felt unwell to work due to work-related stress but had continued to undertake their duties regardless (Maguire and Sondhi, 2022). Other researchers have suggested that high stress and poor well-being levels are rooted in a masculine police culture that discourages help-seeking (see e.g. Foley *et al.*, 2022; Redmond *et al.*, 2023).

Launched in response to the UK government's rape review (Home Office, 2021), early research conducted within Operation Soteria Bluestone (OSB; pillar 4) has uncovered an unexpected relationship between learning and development and well-being; namely, limited access to effective specialist learning can negatively impact on both the perceived competence and well-being of investigators (Williams *et al.*, 2022; see also Stanko, 2022). This rapid review aimed to further assess this relationship by investigating what other public-service occupations, that have undergone professionalization at different points, could reveal about 'best practice' and how this might inform learning and development in policing ahead of a re-design of certain elements of RASSO training.

The following research questions (RQ) were identified:

1. What is the nature of the relationship between learning and development and the well-being of police officers?
2. What is 'best practice' in relation to learning and development for those involved in the investigation of RASSO?
3. How might the learning and development of professionals who work in other public sector occupations (e.g. teaching, nursing, social work, paramedicine) inform 'best practice' in the policing of rape?

This article consists of four sections. Section two outlines the methodology underpinning this rapid review. Section three presents the thematic findings identified from the analysis. Section four discusses these findings in the context of the research questions, considers the academic and practical implications of the review, and draws a conclusion.

## METHOD

### Search strategy

The research was conducted following the approaches developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and later refined by Levac *et al.* (2010). The search strategy encompassed academic, peer-reviewed literature as well as grey literature with searches conducted between October and December 2022.

In relation to the peer-reviewed literature, four well-established electronic databases were used, as relevant to each particular research question; namely, Criminal Justice Abstracts, Google Scholar, Scopus, and Education Abstracts. In relation to the grey literature, a targeted hand search was undertaken of the websites of agencies with a known or likely interest in police learning and development and/or the well-being of police officers. This included professional policing publications (e.g. Policing Insight), reports generated within relevant policing agencies (National Police Wellbeing Service; College of Policing; Police Federation), policing think tanks (Police Foundation), and policing charities (Police Care UK). A search of EThOS was also conducted to identify any relevant dissertations or theses.

Additionally, a hand search was performed of Google which was limited to first 10 pages.

Search terms were developed through an iterative process. These terms were combined in search strings along with Boolean operators 'AND' and 'OR'. The symbol \* was used in conjunction with 'professional' to include professionalization and professionalism. Variations of keywords were used to reflect differences in spelling (e.g. wellbeing or well-being) and different contexts (e.g. 'law enforcement' in an American context compared to 'policing' in the UK). The final set of search terms was clustered in relation to the research questions:

RQ1: 'training', 'learning', 'police officers', 'policing', 'law enforcement', 'wellbeing', 'well-being', 'mental health', and 'organisational stressors'.

RQ2: 'training', 'learning', 'police officers', 'policing', 'law enforcement', 'rape investigation', 'sexual assault investigation'.

RQ3: 'professional knowledge' OR 'professional skills' OR 'professional\*' AND 'teacher training' OR 'teacher education' AND 'best practice' (replacing 'teacher' with social work, nursing, paramedicine).

### Study selection

Searches of the electronic databases revealed a total of 3,649 titles. In addition, 24 titles were located through hand searching. In the first stage of screening, the title, abstract, and conclusion of each article were assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria as outlined in Table 1.

At the full-text review stage of screening, a further 13 titles were also excluded from the review for various reasons (as detailed in Figure 1). This left 52 valid titles which consisted of peer-reviewed, academic articles (39), reports (9), theses (2), and 2 book chapters (2). Most of these titles emanated from either the UK (18) or America (17) but also Australia (10), Ireland (2), New Zealand (1), and Canada (1). Two papers had an international focus. The titles were screened and ordered using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) flow diagram (Figure 1). The titles featured in this review are summarized in Table 2 with each title numbered alphabetically (1–52) to enable easier reference in the sections below.

### Quality appraisal

Following the guidelines of Levac *et al.* (2010), a quality assessment of individual titles featured in the review was conducted. The 'weight of evidence' (WoE) approach was selected (Gough, 2007) from a vast number of appraisal tools that exist (see Carroll and Booth, 2014). This was seen as compatible with the combination of qualitative and quantitative studies featured in the review. Gough's approach identifies three criteria for appraisal, including quality of evidence, appropriateness, and relevance. These were applied to each of the 52 studies at the full-text review stage and resulted in a single, aggregated WoE 'score' of 'high', 'medium', or 'low'. Scores for each title are noted in Table 2. Using this appraisal tool, 15 titles were rated as 'high' quality, 23 scored 'medium' and 14 were considered 'low'.

**Table 1:** Inclusion and exclusion criteria in the review

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Published/authored between 2000 and 2022</li> <li>▪ Published in English</li> <li>▪ Research based in English-speaking countries only</li> <li>▪ References to learning and development (or training) and wellbeing in general or specific policing context</li> <li>▪ References to learning and development (or training) specifically in context of rape and sexual assault investigation</li> <li>▪ References to learning and development (or training) in other public-service professions (nursing, teaching, social work, paramedicine)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Published/authored before 2000</li> <li>▪ Non-English-language titles</li> <li>▪ Research not based in English-speaking countries</li> <li>▪ Sole focus on well-being/mental health of police officers, for example, resilience training</li> <li>▪ Sole emphasis on <i>victim</i> well-being/mental health, for example, crisis intervention training</li> <li>▪ Sole emphasis on the effect of the COVID pandemic on police officer well-being</li> </ul>

### Data synthesis

A thematic analysis was conducted on the featured titles following the approach established by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis was undertaken by a single researcher but with input from members of the research team, particularly in relation to the refinement of research questions and search terms. Familiarity with the titles was enhanced during the screening stage and subsequent full-text review. Initial open coding of the titles was completed with the assistance of NVivo and employed an inductive approach which generated approximately 180 codes. This was reduced to approximately 90 by the end of the analysis through a recursive process of merging, refining, and removing duplicated codes. Through several iterations, the data was eventually reduced into three overarching themes and associated sub-themes, which are summarized in Table 3.

## THEMATIC FINDINGS

This section presents the overarching themes identified from the thematic analysis. Theme 1 relates to the ideal content of specialist RASSO training, with a strong emphasis on a trauma-informed approach and the cultivation of soft skills. Theme 2 relates to how best to deliver learning and development through a range of effective strategies that are strongly underpinned by reflective practice and an effective balance between theory and practice. The final theme connects to the importance of evaluation, particularly the inclusion of appropriate outcome measures when assessing the impact of training, alongside the need for ongoing learning and development. Throughout the analysis, where possible, themes will be connected to officer well-being and the implications for learning and development in the RASSO field will be considered.

### Theme 1: considering which specialist knowledge and skills to develop: the need for RASSO specialism

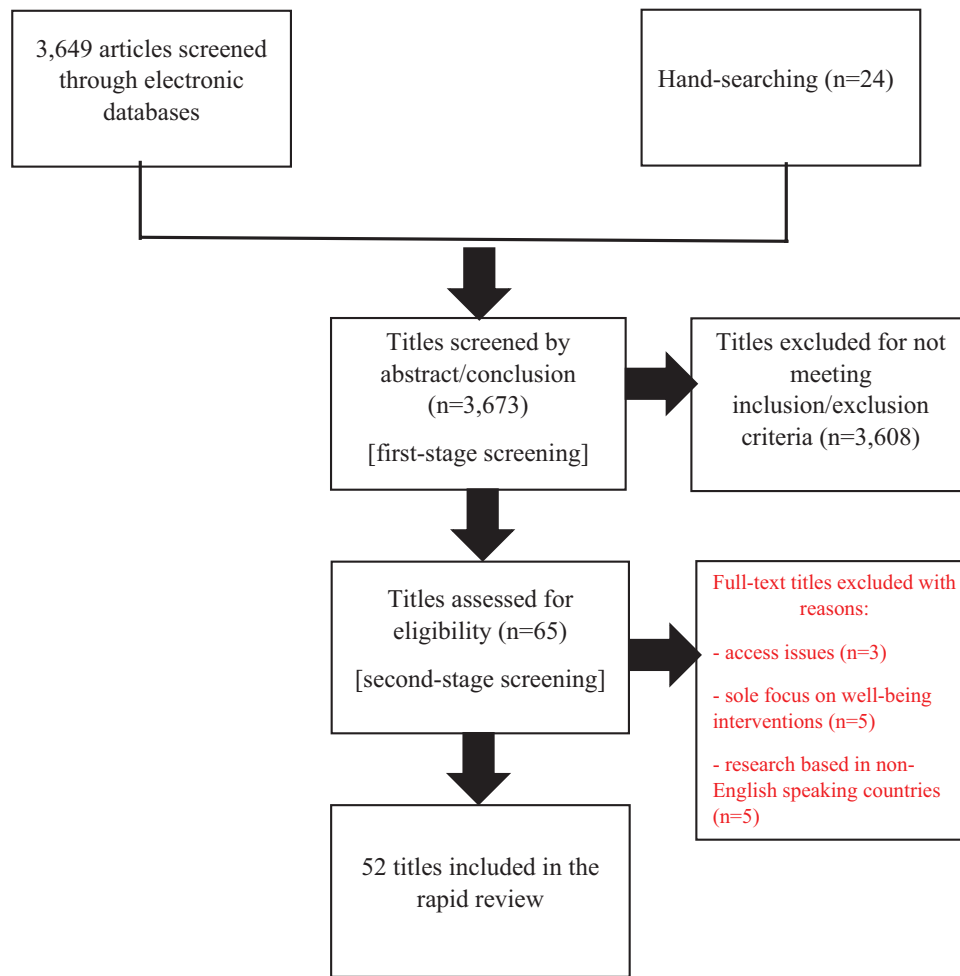
Professional training generally aims to cultivate a set of skills, a body of knowledge, and certain attitudes that will enable practitioners to undertake their work with increased confidence and efficacy. Several titles advocate strongly for specialist RASSO training to be made available for investigators (10, 20, 37, 40, 45, 49, 52). This is based on an understanding of rape as a complex crime involving an assessment of consent, and frequently grounded in an intricate relationship between highly vulnerable victim-survivors and suspects (10, 52). Specialized training is seen as beneficial particularly in relation to enhanced victim outcomes: interviews with victim-survivors are seen as more positive, with higher levels of engagement which leads to improved investigation outcomes (10).

However, some titles also note that RASSO training in England and Wales is not widely available (36, 52). Another revealed that over half of officers in their sample had no specific training in rape investigation and could not access training due to workload (28). This contrasts with the situation in certain American jurisdictions where such training is both mandatory (3) and also highly prevalent (50). Furthermore, specialization exists in tension with ‘omnicompetence’ whereby officers are seen as ‘investigative generalists’ who examine a range of offences (52). The shift towards omnicompetence is clearly evident in England and Wales with recent figures revealing that 17 out of 43 police forces no longer have a specialist RASSO unit (Guardian, 2021).

These tensions and challenges mean that RASSO officers are potentially left with a largely uncultivated skill set with little specialist knowledge which is rooted in their own and their peers’ experiential learning (an issue returned to later—Theme 2). Some studies show the possible detrimental effects on investigators’ levels of self-efficacy and, in turn, their well-being (28, 36, 52). In this sense, lack of training constitutes one of a number of organizational stressors that police officers routinely experience. One title, for example, found lack of training was a significant stressor, with some of the more experienced officers in their study reporting gaps between their training and that of newly qualified officers (19). Another title noted that concerns over well-being in relation to workload and work-life balance were often cited by trainee detectives as the key reason to withdraw from training (46). In noting the nature of these stressors, there have been calls to address well-being at an organizational rather than individual level (24). These findings also align with the view of the police service as a ‘greedy organization’: one that places excessive demands on its officers (Maguire and Sondhi, 2022).

### Ideal RASSO course content

A review of the non-policing literature illustrates how the content of professional training aims to cultivate specialist skills, knowledge, and attitudes (12, 14). Given that training is often delivered across multiple sites, to large cohorts, and by different providers, the need for high levels of coherency in training programmes is noted (18). In the context of RASSO, two coherent threads emphasized in the policing literature are a trauma-informed approach and rape myths.



**Figure 1:** The preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses flow diagram

The importance of a trauma-informed approach within RASSO training is noted in several titles (3, 10, 20, 22, 25, 39). Such an approach applies the current knowledge on trauma, largely gathered from the disciplines of psychology and social work, to working with vulnerable victim-survivors. In the titles reviewed, there is typically a focus on the neurobiology of trauma, alongside enhancing victim-centred interviewing techniques (50). Other titles, however, note how the traits possessed by many police officers—including scepticism and a desire for control—might be incompatible with the principles underpinning trauma-informed practice (39).

Several titles note the importance of challenging any negative attitudes or stereotypes officers may possess about rape and rape victims (10, 22, 25). These ‘rape myths’ are considered likely to affect the way that investigations are conducted and how victim-survivors are treated (the *actual* impact of training on rape myths is returned to later—see Theme 3). Some titles considered that training should ideally acknowledge the attitudinal antecedents of rape myths, rooted in hostility towards women, ambivalent sexism and the sex/power dynamic (33). Another title noted the importance of allocating sufficient time to addressing such biases, reporting that only one hour from a total of 40 was spent exploring myths and misconceptions on a training programme (4). Less evident in the reviewed titles, but nevertheless important, was

the idea that RASSO training should be informed by a broader socio-political context, including awareness of movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp, which have significantly shaped the landscape for reporting by drawing media attention to rape (22). The implication here is that specialist training needs a stronger focus on challenging officers’ negative attitudes and beliefs related to rape and rape victims. Such an in-depth exploration of rape myths is likely to be facilitated through reflective practice, which is a point returned to below (Theme 2).

#### Importance of ‘soft’ skills in training

The non-policing literature highlights a distinction between skills that are more procedural and objective (‘hard’) and those that are more interpersonal and subjective (‘soft’), with effective learning and development striving for an appropriate balance between these skills in a changing educational landscape (41). Specifically, some titles on teacher training acknowledge the emergence of a ‘knowledge society’ (14) and how this requires practitioners to cultivate ‘21st-century skills’ (18) in both themselves (as educators) and their students. In short, employees need a different skill set to navigate this new, data-rich world of work. There are implications for recruitment to ensure the careful selection of personnel prior to training. For example, one



**Table 2:** List of titles in the review

<b>Title no.</b>	<b>Authors</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Type of article</b>	<b>WoE score</b>
1	<a href="#">Andrews et al. (2006)</a>	Professional roles and communications in clinical placements: A qualitative study of nursing students' perceptions and some models for practice.	Peer-reviewed paper	Medium
2	<a href="#">Burman et al. (2021)</a>	ECHO: A model for professional development in nursing through learning networks.	Peer-reviewed paper	Low
3	<a href="#">Campbell et al. (2020)</a>	An evaluation of Kentucky's sexual assault investigator training: results from a randomized three-group experiment.	Peer-reviewed paper	High
4	<a href="#">Campbell and Lapsey (2021)</a>	Do impulsivity and education moderate the effectiveness of police sexual assault training? Findings from a Solomon four-group quasi-experiment.	Peer-reviewed paper	High
5	<a href="#">Chicca (2020)</a>	Should we use preceptorships in undergraduate nursing education?	Peer-reviewed paper	Medium
6	<a href="#">Chitpin (2011)</a>	Can mentoring and reflection cause change in teaching practice? A professional development journey of a Canadian teacher educator.	Peer-reviewed paper	Low
7	<a href="#">Copley (2019)</a>	An investigation of the value of reflective practice for the professional development of police officers.	Doctoral thesis	Medium
8	<a href="#">Coyne et al. (2018)</a>	Simulation videos presented in a blended learning platform to improve Australian nursing students' knowledge of family assessment.	Peer-reviewed paper	Medium
9	<a href="#">Croisdale-Appleby (2014)</a>	Re-visioning social work education: An independent review. Available at: <a href="https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/285788/DCA_Accessible.pdf">https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/285788/DCA_Accessible.pdf</a>	Report	Medium
10	<a href="#">Dalton et al. (2022)</a>	A systematic review of specialist policing of rape and serious sexual offences.	Peer-reviewed paper	High
11	<a href="#">Darwinkel et al. (2013)</a>	Improving police officer perceptions of sexual offending through intensive training.	Peer-reviewed paper	High
12	<a href="#">Ferne et al. (2019)</a>	Systematic literature review: Professional learning and development in occupations relevant to policing.	Report	Medium
13	<a href="#">Fields et al. (2021)</a>	Active learning pedagogy transformation: A whole-of-school approach to person-centred teaching and nursing graduates.	Peer-reviewed paper	Low
14	<a href="#">General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland, GTCNI (2011)</a>	Teaching: The reflective profession.	Report	Low
15	<a href="#">Harrison et al. (2006)</a>	Mentoring beginning teachers in secondary schools: An analysis of practice	Peer-reviewed paper	Medium
16	<a href="#">Hohl and Stanko (2022)</a>	Five pillars: A framework for transforming the police response to rape and sexual assault.	Peer-reviewed paper	Medium
17	<a href="#">Howard et al. (2003)</a>	Teaching evidence-based practice: Towards a new paradigm for social work education.	Peer-reviewed paper	Medium
18	<a href="#">Ingvarson and Buckley (2014)</a>	Best practice teacher education programs. Australian Council for Educational Research.	Report	Medium
19	<a href="#">Jackman et al. (2021)</a>	'We are fighting a tide that keeps coming against us': A mixed method exploration of stressors in an English county police force	Peer-reviewed paper	Medium
20	<a href="#">Jordan (2011)</a>	Here we go round the review-go-round: Rape investigation and prosecution—are things getting worse not better?	Peer-reviewed paper	Medium
21	<a href="#">Kinney et al. (2008)</a>	Sexual assault training of law enforcement officers: Results of a state-wide survey.	Peer-reviewed paper	Medium
22	<a href="#">Lathan et al. (2019)</a>	The promise initiative: Promoting a trauma-informed police response to sexual assault in a mid-size Southern community.	Peer-reviewed paper	Medium

Table 2. Continued

Title no.	Authors	Title	Type of article	WoE score
23	<a href="#">Leggatt (2016)</a>	Overcoming the barriers of distance: Using mobile technology to facilitate moderation and best practice in initial teacher training.	Peer-reviewed paper	Medium
24	<a href="#">Lewis et al. (2019)</a>	Police and workforce well-being and organisational development.	Report	Low
25	<a href="#">Lonsway et al. (2001)</a>	Police training in sexual assault response: Process, outcomes, and elements of change.	Peer-reviewed paper	High
26	<a href="#">Lord and Rassel (2008)</a>	Law enforcement's response to sexual assault: A comparative study of nine counties in North Carolina.	Peer-reviewed paper	Medium
27	<a href="#">Lorenz and Maskaly (2016)</a>	The relationship between victim attitudes and, training and behaviours of sexual assault investigators.	Peer-reviewed paper	High
28	<a href="#">Lovell (2022)</a>	Barriers to improving rape investigation. College of policing report.	Report	Medium
29	<a href="#">Lupinski et al. (2012)</a>	Reflective practice in teacher education programmes at HBCU.	Peer-reviewed paper	Low
30	<a href="#">McCoyd and Kerson (2013)</a>	Teaching reflective social work practice in health care: Promoting best practices.	Peer-reviewed paper	Low
31	<a href="#">McSharry, Lathlean (2017)</a>	Clinical teaching and learning within a preceptorship model in an acute care hospital in Ireland: A qualitative study.	Peer-reviewed paper	Low
32	<a href="#">Mourtgos et al. (2021)</a>	Improving victim engagement and officer response in rape investigations: A longitudinal assessment of a brief training.	Peer-reviewed paper	High
33	<a href="#">Murphy and Hine (2019)</a>	Investigating the demographic and attitudinal predictors of rape myth acceptance in UK. Police officers: developing an evidence base for training and professional development.	Peer-reviewed paper	High
34	<a href="#">Naidoo and Wagner (2020)</a>	Thriving, not just surviving: The impact of teacher mentors on preservice teachers in disadvantaged school contexts.	Peer-reviewed paper	Low
35	<a href="#">Needham et al. (2016)</a>	Best practice in clinical facilitation of undergraduate nursing students.	Peer-reviewed paper	Low
36	<a href="#">Norman et al. (2022)</a>	Critical reflection: The importance of case reviews and reflective practice in rape and serious sexual offences investigation.	Peer-reviewed paper	High
37	<a href="#">Powell and Wright (2018)</a>	Professionals' perceptions of a new model of sexual assault investigation adopted by Victoria police.	Peer-reviewed paper	High
38	<a href="#">Rape Crisis Network Ireland, RCNI (2017)</a>	The investigation of sexual violence: Priority recommendations.	Report	Medium
39	<a href="#">Rich (2019)</a>	Trauma-informed police responses to rape victims.	Peer-reviewed paper	Medium
40	<a href="#">Rumney et al. (2020)</a>	A police specialist rape investigation unit: A comparative analysis of performance and victim care.	Peer-reviewed paper	Medium
41	<a href="#">Skoura-Kirk et al. (2021)</a>	Playing its part: An evaluation of professional skill development through service user-led role-plays for social work students.	Peer-reviewed paper	Low
42	<a href="#">Sleath and Bull (2012)</a>	Comparing rape victim and perpetrator blaming in a police officer sample: Differences between police officers with and without special training.	Peer-reviewed paper	High
43	<a href="#">Soukup and McCleish (2008)</a>	Advancing evidence-based practice: A program series.	Peer-reviewed paper	Low
44	<a href="#">Stanko and Hohl (2018)</a>	Why training is not improving the police response to sexual violence against women: A glimpse into the 'black box' of police training.	Book chapter	Medium
45	<a href="#">Tidmarsh et al. (2021)</a>	Police officers' perceptions of specialist training, skills, and qualities needed to investigate sexual crime.	Peer-reviewed paper	High

Table 2. Continued

Title no.	Authors	Title	Type of article	WoE score
46	Tong <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Responding to police workforce transformation: Detective recruitment and training 2018–2020.	Report	Medium
47	Turnley (2014)	Education and training of specialist sexual offence investigators in Victoria, Australia from 2009 to 2011.	PhD thesis	High
48	Tuttle <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Critical challenges to police officer wellness.	Book chapter	Medium
49	Van Staden and Lawrence (2010)	A qualitative study of a dedicated sexual assault investigation unit.	Report	Low
50	Venema <i>et al.</i> (2020)	A descriptive study of training and its perceived helpfulness among Illinois sexual assault investigators.	Peer-reviewed paper	High
51	Webster (2011)	Why educators should bring an end to pedagogy.	Peer-reviewed paper	Low
52	Williams <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Linking professionalism, learning and wellbeing in the context of rape investigation: Early findings from Project Bluestone.	Peer-reviewed paper	High

Table 3: A summary of the themes

Overarching theme	Sub-theme
1. Considering which specialist knowledge and skills to develop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The need for RASSO specialism</li> <li>▪ Ideal RASSO course content</li> <li>▪ Importance of ‘soft’ skills</li> </ul>
2. Encouraging active and reflective learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Effective teaching and learning</li> <li>▪ Integrating theory and practice</li> <li>▪ Developing reflective practice</li> </ul>
3. Measuring the impact of learning and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The need for evaluation and quality assurance</li> <li>▪ A diversity of outcome measures in specialist RASSO training</li> <li>▪ Learning as ongoing</li> </ul>

review of high-performing education systems revealed that entry into teaching is highly selective with often only the top 30% of the student cohort being recruited (18).

In relation to policing, one Australian study found that these softer, interpersonal skills were perceived as crucial by rape investigators themselves (45). Officers who were asked to list up to five important qualities of sexual assault investigators both before and after specialist training consistently identified empathy, communication skills, patience, and drive. Other research also notes that officers perceived high levels of motivation and enthusiasm as essential qualities. In contrast, officers perceived as less driven were described as ‘dead wood’ by some respondents (40). Another title found that softer skills were often not prioritized in training in contrast to hard skills, such as the identification and preservation of physical evidence (50). This echoes the criticism noted in another study that the cultivation of softer skills needs to urgently improve (16). In certain titles, and somewhat stereotypically, female officers were perceived as more likely to possess these skills than their male counterparts (26) in ways that reinforced the notion of certain aspects of rape investigation as ‘women’s work’ (38). There is a recognition that officers will vary in the extent to which they can demonstrate the required interpersonal skills, meaning that not all officers are

equally suited to investigating rape (20, 37, 48). One title supports the view that it is better to judge the suitability for RASSO roles pre-training rather than attempt the challenging task of teaching skills and pre-programming attitudes simultaneously (47).

#### Theme 2: encouraging active and reflective learners: effective teaching and learning

The wider literature relating to public-service professions reveals several aspects of teaching and learning which constitute ‘best practice’. Firstly, blended learning can effectively combine online technology with face-to-face, classroom-based learning. One title on nurse education found use of simulated videos substantially enhanced levels of engagement and learning (8). Another title found I-Pads were a beneficial tool for recording the practice of trainee teachers and also offering opportunities for deep reflection (23). Arguably, embedding such technology into training is particularly likely to appeal to younger recruits into policing (Williams and Sondhi, 2022).

Secondly, effective mentoring is seen as providing a catalyst for personal and professional growth within learning and development (6, 15), especially where it is based on a trusting relationship between mentor (or supervisor/preceptor) and learner (18, 31). Effective mentoring is seen to promote reflection through the provision of constructive feedback. This can enable students to become more confident as professionals, especially when working in challenging environments (34). Conceptually, mentoring is seen as occurring either through a scaffolding process (35), constructed by the mentor as a more advanced peer, or through the mentor modelling best practice which is then acquired by the trainee through social learning (30).

Thirdly, active learning—whereby students are highly engaged and encouraged to take ownership for their own learning—is considered to be more effective than more traditional, didactic approaches and can be promoted in several ways. One title reports on a successful attempt to use flipped learning in nurse education, whereby students completed online activities

prior to face-to-face classroom-based learning (13). In social work education, role play exercises also encourage active learning (41) and are also used as a means of assessing practice at the end of training. However, a dislike of active learning is also noted in certain titles (1, 6).

While these aspects of teaching and learning are clearly evident, to different degrees, in other professions, it is unclear from this review whether they are embraced in RASSO learning and development. As noted above (Theme 1), there is currently a lack of specialized training in the police forces of England and Wales and also, as discussed below, learning and development is rarely evaluated (see Theme 3). Additionally, those titles with a focus on RASSO training typically provide more detail about training content rather than delivery. Although not within the scope of this review, concerns have been raised elsewhere in relation to the use of para-militaristic approaches to learning and development within police recruit training, which are described as trainer-led and didactic, and at odds with active learning pedagogies (see [Belur et al., 2020](#)).

### Integrating theory and practice

'Best practice' is seen as an effective blending of theoretical and practical knowledge. Specifically, the placement or clinical learning encourages students to apply their conceptual understanding to real cases and/or clients. For example, one title research shows how nurses need opportunities to develop psychomotor and affective skills to enable them to become competent practitioners (5). Similarly, trainee teachers require practical opportunities to implement classroom management strategies which are often rooted in Behaviourist theories of Operant Conditioning (18).

Another title on teacher education warns of the dangers inherent in any training that emphasizes practice at the exclusion of theory (51), implying that the underlying theory or educational philosophy is crucial in providing 'big picture justifications' that explain why certain teaching and learning strategies are being embraced. There are dangers, then, in reducing training to a set of instructional strategies. Indeed, this is echoed in the very distinction between 'training' (know how) and 'education' (know why) (9). Conversely, there is some evidence from reviews into nurse training that an over-emphasis on theoretical knowledge and an under-emphasis on practical skills was evident in the early stages of degree-based entry (12), which is where policing is currently positioned. This suggests that finding an effective balance between theory and practice can take time.

In the absence of any formal training, officers are even more likely to learn experientially and informally from their own and their peers' trial-and-error experiences (36, 52). There is, however, a broad consensus that knowledge and skills in RASSO investigation cannot solely be acquired through 'learning on the job' (10, 44, 46) but require specialist training (as outlined in Theme 1). These assertions are not intended to de-value experiential learning, which is clearly shown in the wider literature reviewed here to play an important role in much professional training (35, 41). One title, however, notes the limitations of practitioners learning from flawed experiences and with few opportunities for critical reflection (52). Furthermore, some titles recognize that specialist training should be rooted in

scientific rather than 'craft' knowledge (7, 44, 46). Establishing an evidence base is more apparent, to different degrees, in those public-service occupations that are further along the road towards professionalization (5, 17, 18, 43). The reliance on experiential learning (36, 52), along with the poor availability of specialist training mean that the scope for integrating theory and practice is currently somewhat limited. Several possibilities, however, exist for bridging this gap which include mentoring, as discussed above, but also reflective practice which is the focus of the next section.

### Developing reflective practice

The wider literature on non-policing professions reveals numerous ways in which reflective practice (RP), in different forms, can strongly underpin effective teaching and learning. Reflective practice has long been embedded in teacher training (6), later becoming a key feature in both nursing (6) and social work education (9) as these occupations underwent professionalization. Indeed, the development of reflective practitioners is inextricably linked to being a professional (29). In teacher education, the foundations of RP are established through initial training and become an important thread running through Continuing Professional Development (CPD) where practitioners are steered to new and improved ways of thinking and acting (6, 18). Practical experiences, often derived from placements or clinical supervision, provide trainees with material for reflection. RP is facilitated through mentoring (1), especially where mentors pose 'how', 'why', and/or 'what if' questions (31). Journals, diaries, and portfolios are considered useful mediums for engaging participants in reflection (29).

Given the emergence of the professionalization agenda in policing, the complexity of rape cases, and the potential for harmful effects on officer well-being, RP could be seen as having a particularly important role in learning and development. However, such training is marked by an absence or even a resistance to RP (7). Some titles acknowledge the many possible benefits of embracing RP within RASSO training. For example, reflection can contribute positively to an examination of the biases and misconceptions officers may hold towards victims, suggesting a key role in challenging rape myths (33). Others suggest that the negative impact of investigating RASSO cases on officer well-being can be mitigated through reflection which is encouraged by supervisory practice and mentoring (36, 45). One study which introduced 'reflective time-out sessions' for police officers (7), noted the resulting gains in emotional intelligence as a 'soft' skill. Collectively, these titles align with wider calls to embed RP as a 'cognitive and emotional mechanism to negotiate the ambiguity and complexity of policing in contemporary society' ([Christopher, 2015](#), p. 335).

Theme 3: measuring the impact of learning and development: the need for evaluation and quality assurance  
The non-policing literature reviewed here reveals the importance of evaluating learning and development in rigorous, systematic, and formal ways. For example, one title on nurse education noted the importance of pre-test/post-test designs, of weekly CPD session evaluations, and other outcome metrics (2). Another title that reviewed social work education noted the importance of conducting evaluations longitudinally, to establish the efficacy



**Table 3.** Continued and cost-effectiveness of training (9). Allied to evaluation is the need for quality assurance—a way of ensuring that evaluation data is continually used to monitor and improve learning and development. Titles show that effective teacher education programmes are characterized by strong quality assurance processes (18), and such mechanisms are effective in ensuring high-quality placements in nurse education (1).

While some formal and rigorous evaluation, drawing on experimental designs, is evident in research conducted in America (3, 4, 25), these and other titles also recognize that evaluation of RASSO training is scarce (3, 4, 21, 25). More typically, evaluation is informal and consists solely of feedback sheets completed voluntarily by course participants (47). For certain critics, the absence of evaluation signals a police culture which is ‘hermetically sealed’ and occurs in a ‘black box’: in short, learning and development take place in-house, behind closed doors, and beyond any external scrutiny (16).

#### A diversity of outcome measures in specialist RASSO training

Using a diverse range of outcome measures, as part of rigorous approach to evaluation, is seen as important in specialist training (21). As noted earlier (Theme 1), an important feature of RASSO learning and development is to challenge rape myths meaning that impactful training should, therefore, reduce levels of RMA in officers. However, the studies using attitudinal measures have yielded mixed findings: some show improved attitudes towards sexual assault cases (11), whereas others have found no impact on levels of RMA (22, 25), victim-blaming (42), or perceptions of victims (27).

It is widely acknowledged that *sole* use of RMA as an outcome metric is flawed (10, 25). This links to broader methodological problems connected to the use of questionnaires and psychometric scales. For example, some titles recognize the limitation of evaluating through questionnaires alone since non-experimental designs are unable to claim that reduced levels of RMA are solely a function of training (3, 4). Another title notes the importance of long-term follow-up metrics to see if positive change is maintained over time (45). For some authors, the existence of a social desirability bias might explain both the low levels of RMA apparent in some research and also the lack of impact of specialist training (25).

Consequently, authors have suggested alternative and/or additional outcome measures. For example, one title found that recruits who participated in a simulated sexual assault interview using role play out-performed controls (25). Another study found that the language used by officers in relation to rape cases, specifically, use of the phrase ‘alleged offence’, was substantially reduced post-training (32). Interestingly, one title suggests that officer well-being could be used as a measure of training impact but also notes that this was the most under-represented measure of success in their review (10), implying that the relationship between well-being, and learning and development needs to be considered in a more nuanced way (52).

#### Learning as ongoing

‘Best practice’ training is developmental, iterative, and ongoing. This is at times represented through the metaphor of a ‘journey’

(9, 52). Furthermore, this is a journey not to be rushed, as evident in some criticisms of accelerated training packages in social work (9). In teacher education, transition into the workplace typically occurs through an induction year (14, 18), where new teachers continue to receive mentoring support. This is considered vital given attrition rates as high as 20% for new teachers in the first five years following graduation (18). Regular CPD provides additional learning opportunities with the potential to further enhance self-efficacy and shore-up well-being.

In relation to RASSO, ongoing learning and development is seen to have multiple benefits; namely, it can prevent skill erosion (10), sustain positive outcomes (11), and continue to address biases and misconceptions (39). Several studies note a strong desire amongst investigators for both initial training on appointment to RASSO roles and continued learning and development opportunities (21, 50, 52). A commitment to further cultivating the interpersonal resources and skills of officers in RASSO roles is seen as a longer-term investment in the capabilities of investigators (24). While ongoing learning and development is desired by many police officers, the actual reality is that opportunities for CPD are limited: time for either formal and/or self-directed learning is difficult to take where workloads and case volume are high (52). Additionally, CPD may not be particularly meaningful where initial and often mandated learning and development has not yet been delivered. Recent research on RASSO investigators has, however, recommended that specialized training be regular, compulsory, and ongoing to combat the troubling rape myths revealed by police officers in their study (Gekoski *et al.*, 2023).

## DISCUSSION

Drawing on a literature from teaching, social work, and nursing, the findings from this rapid review reveal a clear and comprehensive picture of ‘best practice’ in relation to the content, delivery, and evaluation of training (RQ3). Simultaneously, however, the review also illuminates a considerable gap or lag: learning and development in the RASSO field are characterized by the absence of many of these features of ‘best practice’ (RQ2). Clearly, one reason for this discrepancy relates to the fact that policing is at a much earlier stage in its journey towards professionalization (White and Heslop, 2012). Many of the titles related to RASSO training instead reveal a sense of ‘poor practice’ and echo the findings of other reviews which have been critical of much learning and development that occurs within policing (see Belur *et al.*, 2020).

Specifically, the overall content of training currently reflects an imbalance between hard and soft skills, an arguably simplistic approach to challenging rape myths, all of which is underscored by wider tensions around the very need for specialized training itself. Little in-depth knowledge is available about the delivery of RASSO training, although what is known suggests a heavy reliance on experiential learning and an absence of reflective practice. The lack of evaluation research, in the UK at least, is to some extent a function of the lack of training available to many investigators: it is impossible to evaluate what is not being delivered. Beyond the UK, however, a number of promising initiatives and developments particularly in America and Australia were evident in the review especially in relation to the prevalence of training, with some rigorous evaluation research also being conducted.

Where learning and development in the RASSO field is not fit for purpose, there are impacts on officer well-being. In relation to RQ1, this review tentatively reinforces the view emerging from OSB that learning and development and well-being are inextricably connected (Williams *et al.*, 2022); namely, inadequate training or a lack of training represents an organizational stressor (Jackman, 2021) which, in turn, affects investigators' confidence, self-efficacy and ultimately well-being. When compounded by other stressors—notably, heavy workload—the danger is that training comes (wrongly) to be seen as a luxury that cannot be afforded rather than a clear investment in police officers' skills, knowledge, and their well-being. Simultaneously, however, it is important to note that training should not be construed as a 'silver bullet' (Stanko and Hohl, 2018): improved training alone will not magically resolve the many challenges facing contemporary policing. Indeed, another reason for the gap in best practice between policing and other public-service professions resides within a police culture that has been largely insular and closed off from external scrutiny. In addition, this culture itself exists as a prominent barrier to the well-being of officers where 'ideas about archetypal masculinity can dominate' (Redmond *et al.*, 2023, p. 3). This means that masculine ideals of self-control can discourage officers from seeking more formal psychological or emotional support (Foley *et al.*, 2022). It remains to be seen whether recent reviews into sexual misconduct and misogyny (Casey, 2023; IOPC, 2022), along with high-profile cases of officer sexual offending (BBC, 2023), will bring about any fundamental change to this organizational culture.

#### Implications for practice and future research

This review raises several important questions with implications for academic and policing practice. Firstly, what kind of individuals do we want in RASSO roles? As noted in other reviews, training needs to orientate around a clear conception of officer capabilities and professional behaviours (McGinley *et al.*, 2019). This review notes the importance of so-called 'soft' skills, along with low levels of RMA at the beginning of training. Secondly, how do we ensure that the 'right people' are allocated to RASSO roles? There is an argument here for the use of reliable and valid ways of measuring these negative attitudes before training which align with recent calls for enhanced vetting procedures in UK policing (HMICFRS, 2022). Thirdly, what is the ideal content of RASSO training? This review adds weight to claims that there needs to be a clearer focus on challenging biases and misconceptions in both initial specialist training but also ongoing CPD, since 'strongly holding and endorsing rape myths is not compatible with conducting RASSO investigations' (Gekoski *et al.*, 2023, p. 16). In addition, a heavily mandated content would also reduce the notable variations in learning and development both across and within police forces (see McGinley *et al.*, 2019). Finally, what do we need to know about the delivery of learning and development in the RASSO field? Research needs to investigate delivery to not only generate a sense of what effective teaching and learning looks like in this area but to further contribute to evidence-based policing (Stanko, 2022).

#### Limitations of this study

One limitation relates to this review being conducted by a single reviewer: the search, full-text review, and analysis were

undertaken by one individual, thereby raising the possibility of increased bias that is less likely when multiple reviewers are involved. This issue may have contributed to the way in which the WoE was applied in the non-policing studies: using this approach collaboratively with another reviewer who possesses greater familiarity with this literature could have achieved a more thorough and accurate weighting of these papers. When critically appraising the titles, it was clear that the overall quality of the papers featured in the review was not as strong as might be indicated by the heavy presence of peer-reviewed articles. Indeed, only 15/52 of the titles were deemed to be of 'high' quality when applying Gough's WoE approach (Gough, 2007), with several other papers being more descriptive and non-empirical in nature. In addition, a disproportionate number of 'low' quality titles emanated from the non-policing literature. On reflection, a wider and more nuanced selection of electronic databases is likely to have identified both a more extensive and potentially higher quality literature in the fields of social work, teaching, nursing, and paramedicine.

## CONCLUSION

As the police service in England and Wales continues its journey towards professionalization, it is clear from this review that much current learning and development in the RASSO field is ineffective. Drawing on insights from comparable public-service occupations, it is evident that policing needs to embrace transformational change rooted in 'an iterative, more open, research-informed learning culture' (Stanko, 2022, p. 12). To these ends, important work is being conducted as part of OSB, specifically in relation to the re-design of elements of specialist RASSO training, in collaboration with the CoP (Stanko, 2022, p. 12). Reconsidering the learning and development offer has potential benefits for investigators and victim-survivors: equipping officers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes will enable them to engage more positively and empathically with victims, which, in turn, is likely to contribute substantially to improved outcomes in the policing of rape and sexual assault.

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