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An Investigation into the underrepresentation of Ethnic Minority Officers within the specialised Units in the UK Police Services

Mohamed Omar Mohamed

Senior Lecturer in Policing and PhD Candidate

De Montfort University

Canterbury Christchurch Centre for Research Annual Conference 21st -22nd January 2026

Shaping Tomorrows' Policing: Evidence, Innovation and Impact

**INSPIRED.
EMPOWERED.
EMPLOYED.**



Presentation Outline

- Background and Introduction
- Police Specialism
- The Research aims and questions
- Conceptual Framework
- Research Methodology
- Literature Review
- Theoretical Framework
- Initial Findings
- Conclusion and Impact
- What is next?
- Q&A

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Background and Introduction

- Macpherson (1999) emphasised the need to eradicate racist prejudice and disadvantage, promote fairness through community confidence, address racist crimes, improve the recruitment and retention of Ethnic Minority Officers and staff, and reduce race disparities in the use of stop and search powers.
- Sir William Morris' Inquiry into the Professional Standards of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) in 2004 has highlighted issues concerning the retention and progression of Ethnic Minority Officers in the police (Morris,2004).
- Ethnic Minority Officers are perceived as exclusive 'close shops' in specialist units, only available to officers who fit a certain stereotypical profile (NatCen, 2018).
- The Home Affairs Committee found that the police have failed to increase the recruitment, retention, and promotion of Ethnic Minority Officers for decades. The committee found that the current rate of recruitment progress will have full representation for Ethnic Minority Officers in the next 20 years (Home Affairs Committee, 2021).

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Background and Introduction

Charman and Bennett (2020) highlighted perceptions of a lack of access to promotion and progression opportunities and an unsustainable workload, which precluded the ability to maintain a reasonable work/life balance that resulted in voluntary resignations.

The Police Race Action Plan (PRAP) was established to address racial disparities in police service and to improve trust and confidence among Ethnic Minority Communities (College of Policing, 2022).

Baroness Casey's Inquiry found a lack of diversity within the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and shortcomings in recruitment, which is reflected in the progression rates throughout the organisation (Casey, 2023).

Well-resourced, with elitist attitudes and toxic cultures of bullying, racism, sexism and ableism, normal rules do not seem to apply or be applied in MO19 (Casey, 2023).

'us versus them' subculture evidence within these units (Gaub and Munoz, 2024).

Newiss et al., (2025) highlights the Serious and Organised Crime (SOC) roles is influenced by several interconnected factors such as perceptions of the work environment, limited awareness and information, recruitment barriers and stereotypes, cultural and perception barriers, promotional and career progression challenges, potential bias in selection processes, operational and cultural norms, and lack of targeted outreach and inclusive recruitment strategies.

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Police Specialism

- Police specialism has evolved significantly, specifically in response to the evolving nature of threats and social developments (Barbin et al., 2024; Weston, 2009).
- According to the College of Policing (2024), specialist units in the UK police range from armed police, major investigation and public protection, public order, public safety, road policing, and intelligence management.
- According to the Police Foundation (2022), police forces have been facing shortages of detectives, victim identification officers, and skilled personnel estimated to be around 6,851.
- Cox et al. (2023) explored diversity and inclusion within firearms teams in England and Wales by surveying and interviewing police officers. They found a significant underrepresentation of women and minority groups in the department with 97% of armed firearms officers (AFOs) identifying as white and only 7% as female.
- Barbin et al., (2024) argued that the structure, shape, and meaning of specialism in policing have evolved to be more inclusive of crime types and accommodate changes in culture, society, and technology.

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Aims and Research Questions

This research aims to critically investigate the underrepresentation of Ethnic Minority Officers in specialist roles or units within the police and to propose potential solutions to address this issue.



Research Questions

How do ethnic minority officers perceive and experience their progression into and within specialist units of the UK police?

How do policies and diversity initiatives impact the recruitment and retention of ethnic minority officers in specialised units?

Are there cultural, organisational, and systematic factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of ethnic minority officers in specialist units?





Conceptual Framework

01

Epistemology

- Epistemology refers to the views about how knowledge should be produced (Clark et al., 2021).

02

Phenomenology (Hermeneutics and Idiographic)-Edmund Husserl

- The phenomenology approach is a school of **thought** that challenges the dominant methods of inquiry and aims to represent a radical movement toward understanding the truth (Moran, 2001).
- Participants' Narratives, Individual perceptions and experiences.
- Individual cases

03

Critical Realism (Ontological)- Roy Bhaskar

- Scientific realism refers to the scientific methods that aim to provide a true representation of the world, but, at times, can be fallible (Gray, 2021). It allows the research to move beyond individual perceptions and explore the social structure and causal mechanisms that may influence their experiences (Danemark et al., 2002).
- Institutional policies, cultural norms and dynamics

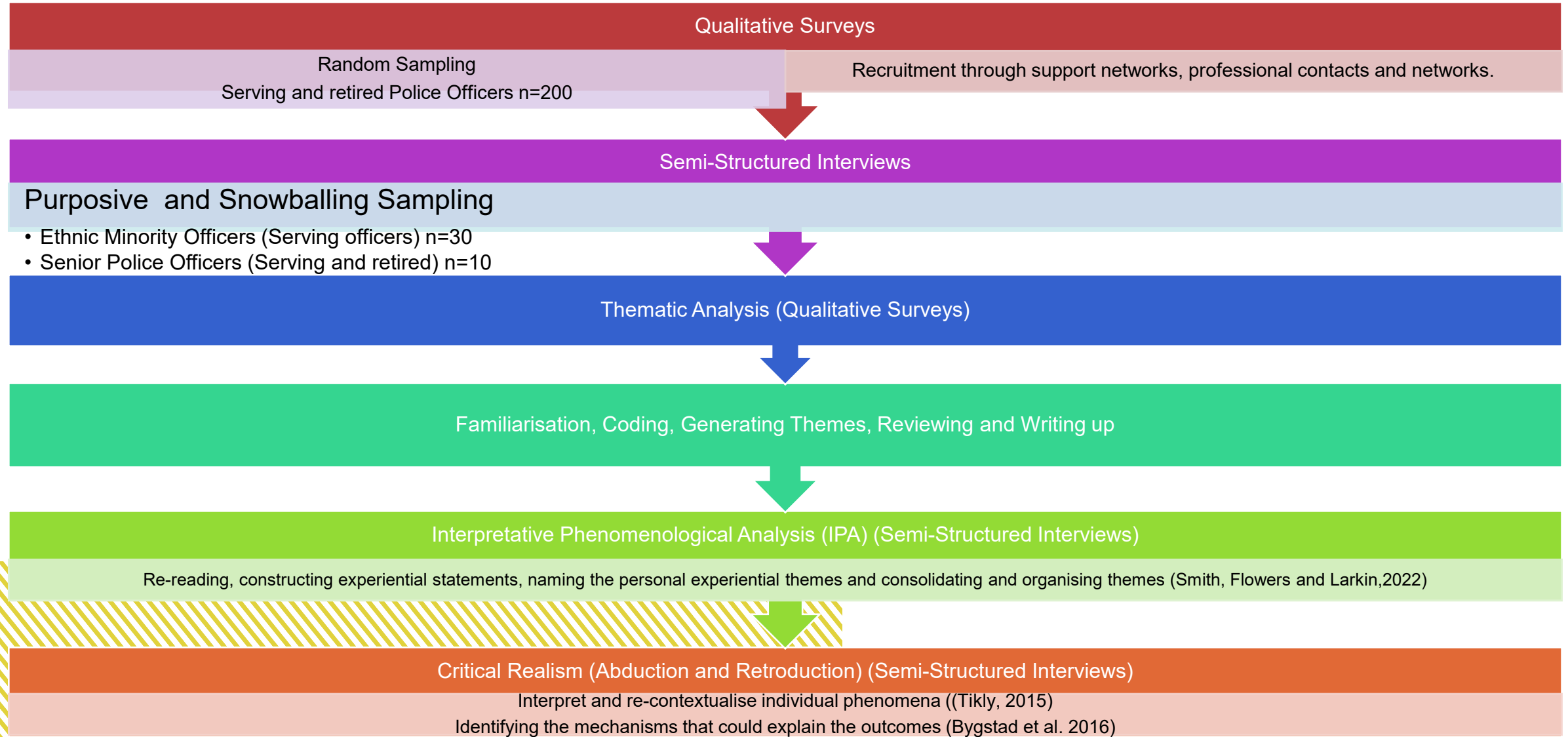
04

Combining these two methods (Phenomenology and Critical realism) allows the researcher to explore the experiences and perceptions of ethnic minority officers within the specialised units (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009).



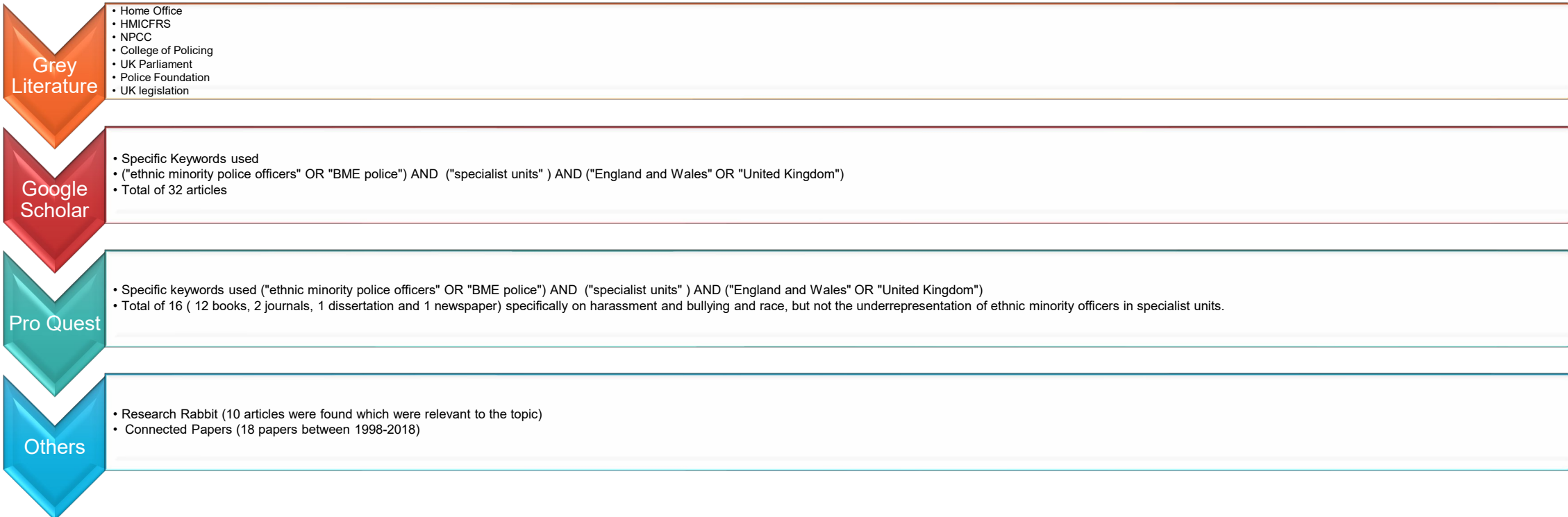


Research Methodology





Literature review





Theoretical Framework

- Implicit bias
 - Zempi (2020) found that female, ethnic minority, and LGBTQ+ officers suffer from bias and prejudice in the police.
- Representative Bureaucracy
 - Existing research has focused on the representative bureaucracy and its impact on ethnic minority citizens, which can increase trust and better representation (Hong,2017;Williams,2008).
- Organisational Culture Theory
 - Orgbonna,(2019) states that organisational culture fails to address the root causes of underrepresentation, which may prioritise superficial diversity over genuine inclusion.
- Tokenism
 - (Stroshine and Brandl, 2011) highlights that it is paramount for police forces to provide equal opportunities for career advancement to officers from ethnic minority groups, as it will have a significant impact on their perceptions of assimilation and associated tokenism.



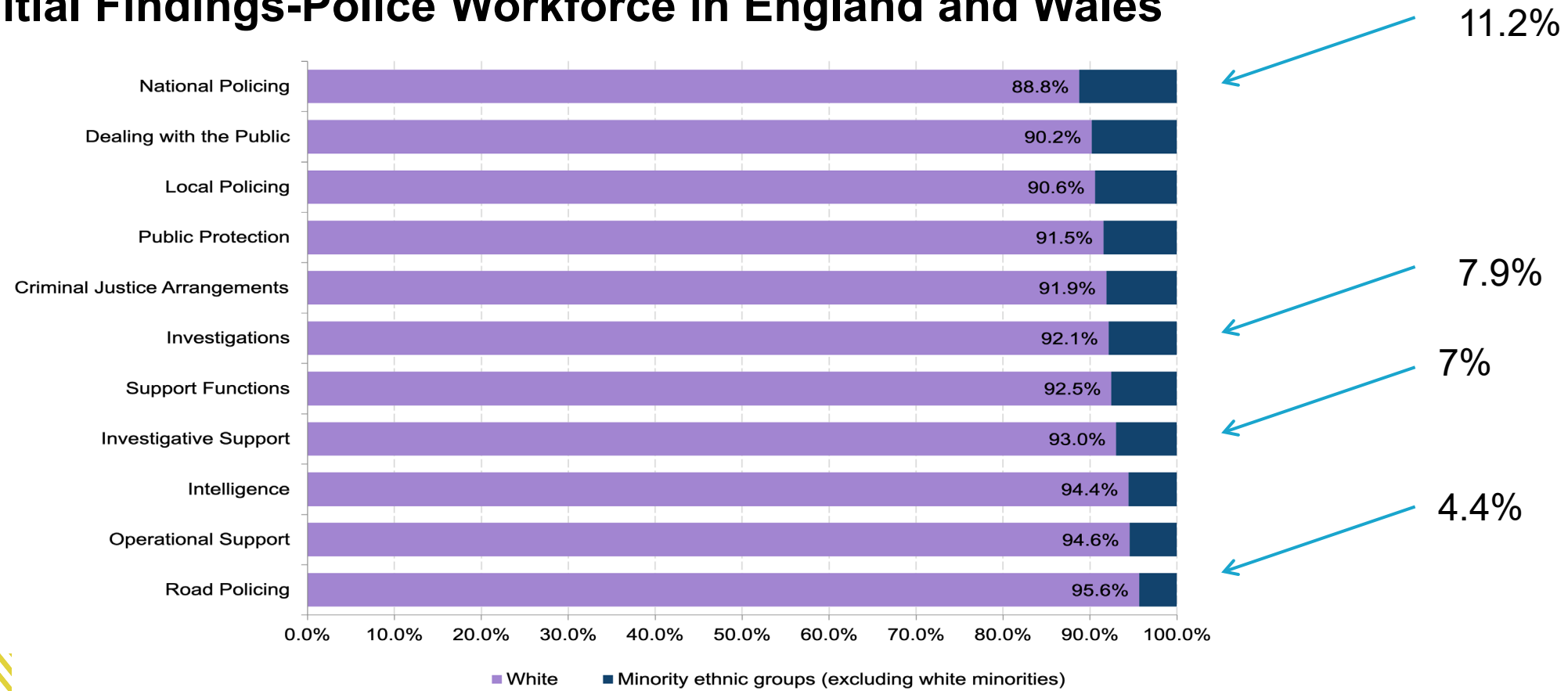
Existing Research-Initial Findings

- Macpherson (1999) made recommendations on improving racial awareness and cultural diversity in the police, including the recruitment, retention, and progression of ethnic minority officers, as well as the development of initiatives to increase the number of recruits from ethnic minority backgrounds.
- Casey's report (2023) highlighted institutional racism, sexism and misogyny within the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS).
- Previous research has indicated a lack of diversity within specialised units, especially in high-profile units, such as traffic departments, firearms, and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) (Cox, 2023).
- Existing research has predominantly focused on the underrepresentation of ethnic minority officers within firearms and traffic departments (NatCen, 2018; Cox, 2014, 2023; Liyanage, 2022; Murphy, 2023), as well as on Racism in Policing (Casey, 2023).
- Ethnic minority officers are discouraged from joining SOC units due to recruitment barriers and the perception that SOC units are inflexible, male-dominated, elitist and only suitable for highly experienced officers (Newiss et al., 2025).
- Anwar et al. (2019) in their study on perceptions of police officers towards their careers in the police force, underscores the tensions between ethnic minority communities and the police.
- Jones and Rowe (2015) suggest that evidence-based approaches can enhance diversity in policing and promote diversity in specialised units, which is essential for operational effectiveness, institutional advantages, and legitimacy.
- It has been argued that achieving a more ethnically representative police service is morally the right thing to do, and a more representative police force may lead to more positive perceptions of the police, which will result in trust and legitimacy (Davies et al., 2021).
- Despite efforts to increase diversity within the police through the Police Race Action Plan (PRAP), the recruitment of ethnic minority officers still remains a significant challenge (Hesketh and Stubbs, 2023).





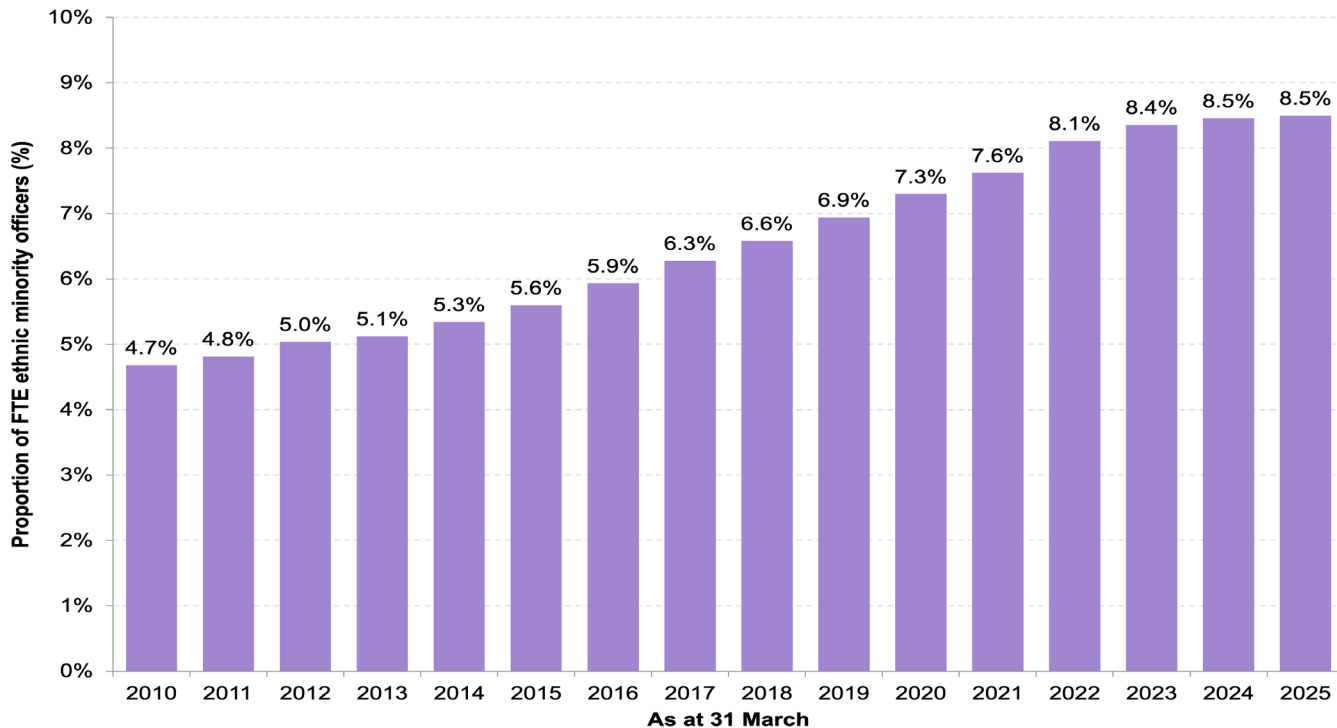
Initial Findings-Police Workforce in England and Wales



Proportion of police officers, by ethnic group and function, as at 31 March 2025, England and Wales (Home Office, 2025)



Proportion of Ethnic Minority Officers in the Police

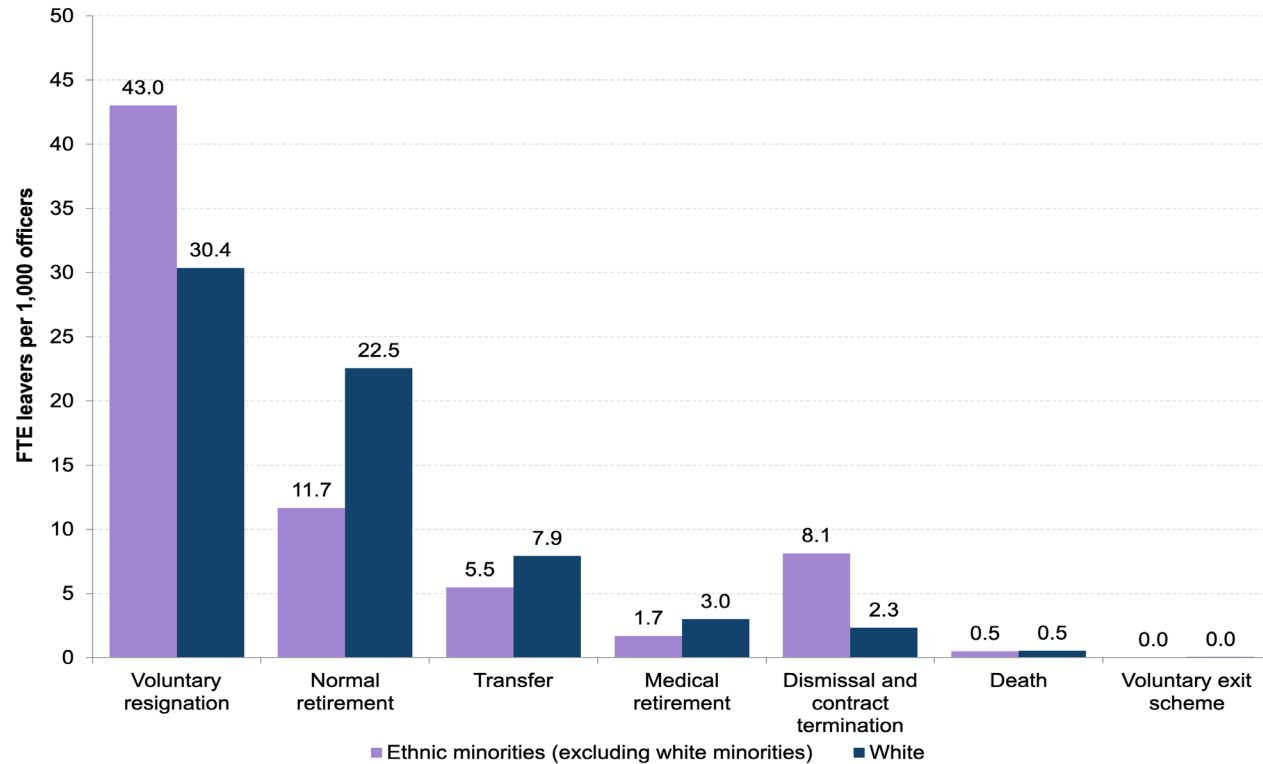


Proportion of police officers who identified as ethnic minorities (excluding White minorities), as at 31 March 2010 to 31 March 2025, England and Wales (Home Office, 2025).





Police Officers-leavers



Number of officers leaving by each exit route per thousand officers, by ethnicity, year ending 31 March 2025 England and Wales (Home Office,2025).





Conclusion and Impact

- The outcome of this study could be of interest to police forces across the UK. It aims to provide a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the underrepresentation of ethnic minority officers in specialist units or roles, insights into the impact of underrepresentation on policy and effectiveness of training, and practical recommendations for improving diversity within these critical units.
- It is hoped that this study will contribute to the existing research on evidence-based policing and interventions or changes to recruitment, progression, and retention practices in police forces.
- In addition, this study will provide an understanding of the barriers and challenges to the representation of ethnic minority officers in specialist units in the police.
- The study will provide a foundation for researchers to be involved in future research and collaboration, as well as publications in peer-reviewed journals and presentations at conferences.

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Conclusion and Impact

- Raising awareness regarding the barriers and challenges to the representation of ethnic minority officers within specialised police units.
- The findings of this research can help develop policies and initiatives that can help improve the recruitment and retention of a diverse workforce within specialised units in the police.
- Contribute to the existing literature on diversity within specialised police units for further scholarly investigation and research.
- Promote social justice for the marginalised groups and promote equality within specialised units in the police, hence improving trust and confidence among ethnic minority communities and the police.

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What is next?





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To achieve this, I need your help.

We are seeking both retired and serving police officers to participate in this research.

We are seeking to understand the factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of ethnic minority officers in specialist units within the UK police and perceptions and attitudes towards specialist units. Also, we are seeking to assess the effectiveness of the strategies and initiatives for the recruitment of ethnic minority officers in specialist units.

If you are interested in taking part or for any more information, please contact

Mohamed.Mohamed@bucks.ac.uk or P2872822@my365.dmu.ac.uk



Mohamed Omar MBA, BSc, CSMP® M.ISMI,
M.ISRM, CAS, SAS-AP, FHEA

Researcher | Academic | Policing & Security
Consultant | Transforming Research into Impactful...





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