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Policing the Police in the United Kingdom: An Exploratory Study of Police Misconduct

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ABSTRACT

Public trust in British policing has been shaken over the past decade by a run of serious misconduct cases, most visibly the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving Metropolitan Police officer in 2021. Since then, the United Kingdom has produced an unusually rich public record on police misconduct: official statistics, inspection reports, independent reviews and new legislation. This study uses that record to examine why police misconduct occurs, how the system for holding officers to account in England and Wales is organised, and what its main benefits and challenges are. It follows a qualitative documentary design. A purposive corpus of 22 publicly available documents published between 2017 and 2026 (official complaint and misconduct statistics, reports of the Independent Office for Police Conduct, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, the Baroness Casey Review, the Angiolini Inquiry and government reform papers) was analysed thematically, alongside the governing legislation and leading case law. The analysis shows that the oversight system has real strengths, including an independent investigator, published learning recommendations, public hearings and a sharp rise in dismissals. It also faces five recurring challenges: a fragmented and layered structure, slow processing of complaints and misconduct cases, the administrative weight of minor complaints, a police culture that has tolerated discriminatory and predatory behaviour and resisted scrutiny, and uncertainty about whether the system's cost produces better behaviour and greater public confidence. The article closes with suggestions for reform and for future research.

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1. Introduction

Every police officer in the United Kingdom holds powers that ordinary citizens do not: to stop and search, to arrest, to detain and, in the end, to use force. The legitimacy of those powers depends on the public believing that officers who abuse them will be identified and dealt with fairly. Oversight is the name we give to the arrangements that are supposed to make this happen. It acts as a system of checks and balances on the police and, at its best, it reassures the public that the police are not marking their own homework (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2011; Walker, 2001).

I came to this topic from an earlier study of police misbehaviour in Pakistan, where my questions were simple ones. Why do some officers misbehave towards the public? What system exists to hold them accountable, and under which laws? What does that system do well, where does it struggle, and how could it be improved? When I began reading about the United Kingdom, I expected to find a settled and well-functioning model that other countries could copy. What I found instead was a system in the middle of a crisis of confidence and a period of rapid reform. That made it, in my view, a more interesting case.

The British model of policing has long been described as policing by consent, and much of the criminological literature on legitimacy argues that people comply with the law and cooperate with the police when they believe the police act fairly (Tyler, 2006; Bradford et al., 2009). Misconduct damages that belief directly. Research on police complaints in England and Wales has also shown, for several decades, that a system in which the police investigate themselves struggles to persuade complainants that it is impartial (Smith, 2004, 2006). The answer adopted in England and Wales, as in many other jurisdictions, has been to add an independent civilian body to the complaints system and to give it its own investigators (Prenzler & Ronken, 2001; Savage, 2013).

The recent history is difficult. In March 2021, Sarah Everard was abducted, raped and murdered by Wayne Couzens, a serving Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) officer. The independent inquiry that followed concluded that Couzens "should never have been a police officer, but opportunities to deny him that privilege were missed" (Angiolini, 2024, p. vi). In the same period, the Daniel Morgan Independent Panel (2021) found that the MPS had shown a form of institutional corruption in its handling of a murder investigation, and Baroness Casey's review of the MPS concluded that the force was institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic (Casey, 2023). His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) put the national position bluntly: "It is too easy for the wrong people to both join and stay in the police" (HMICFRS, 2022).

These documents, and the official statistics that sit alongside them, are the raw material for this study. Following the structure of Stelkia's (2020) exploratory study of police oversight in British Columbia, I first describe how policing and police oversight are organised in the United Kingdom, then look at public confidence in the complaints system and the pressures for reform. I then explain my method and set out the findings under the headings of causes, challenges and benefits, before discussing what they mean and where further research is needed.

2. Policing and Police Oversight in the United Kingdom

2.1 Three Systems in One State

Policing is a devolved matter in the United Kingdom, and there is no single UK-wide complaints system. England and Wales are policed by 43 territorial forces, each led by a chief constable (or, in London, a commissioner) and held to account locally by an elected police and crime commissioner or a mayor. Scotland has had a single national force, Police Scotland, since 2013, and Northern Ireland is policed by the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Each of the three jurisdictions has its own oversight body. In England and Wales it is the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), which replaced the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) in January 2018 under the Policing and Crime Act 2017. The IPCC itself had been created by the Police Reform Act 2002 to replace the Police Complaints Authority, which had been widely criticised for supervising rather than conducting investigations (Smith, 2006). In Scotland, serious incidents and complaint reviews fall to the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner (PIRC), whose framework was reviewed by Dame Elish Angiolini (2020) and then reformed by the Police (Ethics, Conduct and Scrutiny) (Scotland) Act 2025. In Northern Ireland, the Police Ombudsman, created under the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998, investigates all complaints against officers, which makes it the most fully independent of the three models (Savage, 2013).

This study concentrates on England and Wales, because that is where most of the recent public record has been produced and where the largest reforms are taking place. I refer to Scotland and Northern Ireland where the comparison helps, but a full three-way comparison is beyond the scope of one article.

2.2 The Complaints and Misconduct Process in England and Wales

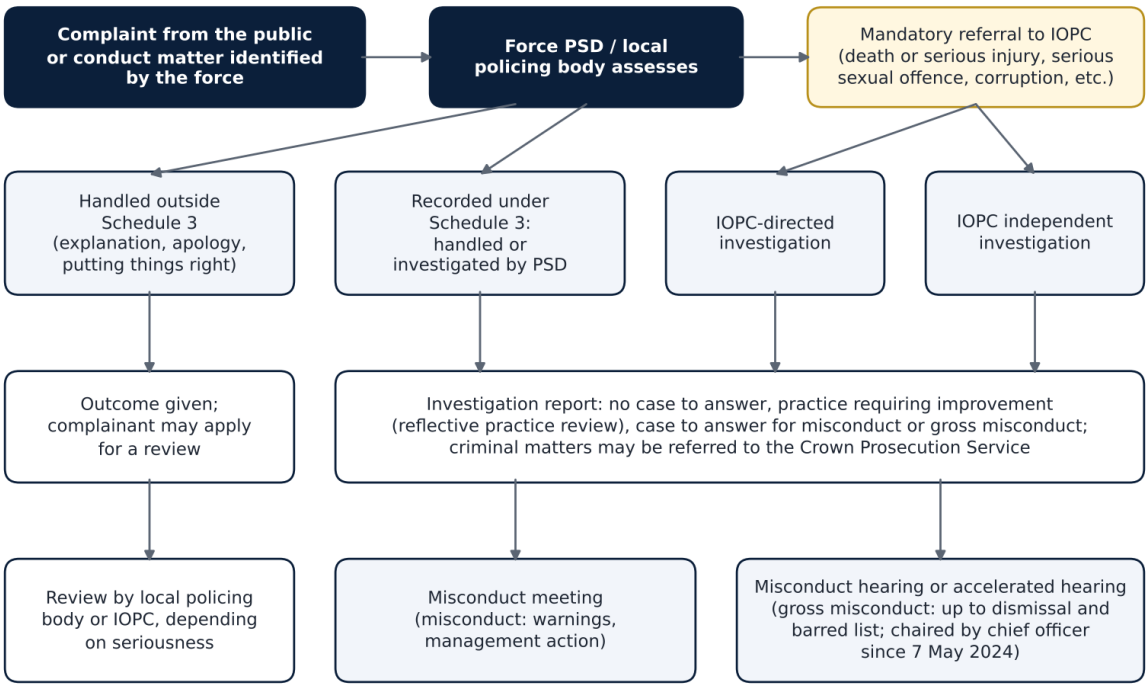
The current process was reshaped on 1 February 2020, when the Police (Complaints and Misconduct) Regulations 2020 and the Police (Conduct) Regulations 2020 came into force. The reforms were meant to make the system less adversarial and more focused on learning. A complaint can now be handled informally, "outside Schedule 3" of the Police Reform Act 2002, where the complainant is content with that approach, or formally recorded under Schedule 3 and then handled, investigated or referred. The 2020 reforms also introduced the concept of "practice requiring improvement" and the reflective practice review process for lower-level failings that do not amount to misconduct.

In practice, the great majority of complaints are handled by the force's own professional standards department (PSD). Serious matters, such as deaths and serious injuries following police contact, serious sexual offences, serious corruption and conduct aggravated by discrimination, must be referred to the IOPC, which decides whether the force should investigate locally, whether the investigation should be directed by the IOPC, or whether the IOPC should investigate independently with its own staff. Complainants who are unhappy with the outcome of a complaint can apply for a review, either to the local policing body or to the IOPC, depending on the seriousness of the matter.

Where an investigation finds a case to answer, the officer may face a misconduct meeting (for misconduct) or a misconduct hearing (for gross misconduct, which can lead to dismissal). Accelerated hearings exist for cases where the evidence is clear and incontrovertible. Since 7 May 2024, misconduct hearings have been chaired by the chief officer of the force or a senior delegate, advised by a legally qualified person and sitting with two independent lay members, following the Police (Conduct) (Amendment) Regulations 2024. Before then, hearings were chaired by legally qualified chairs. Officers who are dismissed are placed on the police barred list, which prevents them from rejoining policing. Figure 1 sets out the main routes in simplified form.

Figure 1

Simplified Route of a Complaint or Conduct Matter in England and Wales



Note. Author's simplification based on the Police Reform Act 2002 (Schedule 3), the Police (Complaints and Misconduct) Regulations 2020, the Police (Conduct) Regulations 2020 and the Police (Conduct) (Amendment) Regulations 2024. PSD = professional standards department; IOPC = Independent Office for Police Conduct.

2.3 The Legal Framework Governing Misconduct

Misconduct in England and Wales is defined by reference to the Standards of Professional Behaviour, which are set out in Schedule 2 to the Police (Conduct) Regulations 2020 and expanded in the College of Policing's (2024) Code of Ethics. The standards cover honesty and integrity, authority, respect and courtesy, equality and diversity, use of force, orders and instructions, duties and responsibilities, confidentiality, fitness for work, discreditable conduct and the duty to challenge and report improper conduct. A breach serious enough to justify disciplinary action is misconduct; a breach so serious that dismissal would be justified is gross misconduct.

The criminal law also applies to officers. Apart from ordinary offences such as assault or sexual offences, the common law offence of misconduct in public office applies where a public officer wilfully neglects their duty or wilfully misconducts themselves to such a degree as to amount to an abuse of the public's trust in the office holder, without reasonable excuse or justification (*Attorney General's Reference (No 3 of 2003)*, 2004).

Two judgments of the UK Supreme Court have been especially important. In *Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis v DSD* (2018), the Court held that Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, given effect by the Human Rights Act 1998, imposes a duty on the police to conduct an effective investigation into serious violence, and that serious failures in investigation can found a claim. In *R (W80) v Director General of the IOPC* (2023), the Court held that, in misconduct proceedings, an officer's use of force in self-defence is to be judged by the civil law test, meaning that an honest but mistaken belief must also be reasonable. That ruling became a central point of contention in the reform debate described below.

3. Public Confidence in the Police Complaints System

Public confidence is both a goal of oversight and one of the main ways of judging it. The IOPC commissions a regular public perceptions tracker. In its 2024/25 report, which combined three survey waves with a total of 6,383 adult respondents, 48% of people said they were confident that the police deal fairly with complaints, while 41% were not (IOPC, 2025e). Only 41% were confident that the IOPC itself does a good job, and almost a third did not know. About a quarter (24%) thought the IOPC was completely independent of the police and around half (49%) thought it was somewhat independent. Two thirds (68%) had heard of the IOPC, although only 4% said they could say a lot about it.

These figures suggest a public that is divided rather than hostile. Most people say they would complain if they were unhappy with an officer's behaviour (around 63% in the latest wave), yet fewer than half are confident that the complaint would be handled fairly. Smith (2009) argued that many people who have grounds to complain never do so, because they doubt that anything will change or fear the consequences. The tracker data are consistent with that argument.

Confidence inside the police service matters too. Baroness Casey's interim report on misconduct in the MPS found "a deep mistrust of the misconduct system" among officers and staff, many of whom did not believe that action would be taken if they reported wrongdoing by colleagues (Casey, 2022, p. 8). When the people who see misconduct first do not trust the process, the system loses its most important source of information.

4. Demand for Oversight Reform and Change

Reform of police accountability in Britain has usually followed a crisis. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry found that the MPS investigation into the racist murder of a Black teenager had been marred by "professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership" (Macpherson, 1999, para. 46.1), and it recommended that complaints against the police be investigated independently, a recommendation that fed into the creation of the IPCC. The report by Bishop James Jones on the experiences of the Hillsborough families described the long struggle of bereaved families against what he called "the patronising disposition of unaccountable power" (Jones, 2017). The Daniel Morgan Independent Panel (2021) concluded that concealing or denying failings for the sake of the organisation's public image amounted to institutional corruption.

The events of 2021 to 2024 produced a new wave of pressure. After the murder of Sarah Everard, three bodies of work examined how officers like Couzens had been able to join and remain in the police. HMICFRS (2022) reviewed 725 vetting files and 264 complaint and misconduct investigations, surveyed 11,277 officers and staff, and made 43 recommendations. It found that people with criminal records or links to organised crime had been allowed to join, and that some cases that should have been treated as gross misconduct had been handled as misconduct or not as misconduct at all. Baroness Casey's interim report (2022) and final report (2023) examined the MPS in depth. The Angiolini Inquiry (2024) traced the red flags missed during Couzens's career, including an indecent exposure report in 2015 that was never investigated and a Police National Database entry that was discounted, without explanation, when he was re-vetted.

The government's response has been a series of reforms. In 2023 the Home Office reviewed the process of police dismissals, which led to the change in who chairs misconduct hearings from May 2024 (Police (Conduct) (Amendment) Regulations 2024). In October 2024, the Home Secretary announced a further package that included statutory vetting standards, a power for chief constables to dismiss officers who fail vetting, automatic gross misconduct findings for officers convicted of certain offences and a presumption of dismissal in gross misconduct cases (Home Office, 2024). The same package responded to concerns from firearms officers following the prosecution of Sergeant Martyn Blake, who was acquitted in October 2024 of the murder of Chris Kaba, shot in Lambeth in September 2022. In April 2025 the IOPC nonetheless decided that Sergeant Blake had a case to answer for gross misconduct (IOPC, 2025b). The October 2024 package proposed anonymity for firearms officers facing trial, a higher threshold for IOPC referrals to the Crown Prosecution Service and a rapid review of the legal test for use of force in misconduct cases. Several of these measures were added to the Crime and Policing Bill in April 2025 (Home Office, 2025b). In October 2025, the government accepted the rapid review's recommendation to replace the civil law test set by the Supreme Court in *W80* with the criminal law test (Godwin & Fulford, 2025; Home Office, 2025a).

These reforms pull in two directions. Some make it easier to remove officers who should not be in policing. Others are designed to give officers more protection when they use force in the line of duty. How the two sets of reforms interact will shape the system for years to come, and it is one of the reasons I think a close reading of the documentary record is worthwhile now.

5. Method

5.1 Research Design and Questions

This is an exploratory, qualitative study based on documentary analysis. Stelkia (2020) used 13 semi-structured interviews with people working inside the British Columbia oversight system. I did not have the access or the ethics approval that interviews with UK police officers, oversight staff and complainants would require. However, the UK has produced a very large volume of detailed public documents on police misconduct in recent years, many of which are themselves based on interviews, surveys, case-file reviews and administrative data. Documentary analysis allowed me to use this material systematically. Bowen (2009) describes documents as "social facts" that are produced, shared and used in organised ways, and he notes that they are particularly suited to qualitative case studies that seek rich descriptions of a single phenomenon or institution.

The study was guided by six research questions adapted from my earlier work on Pakistan:

1. What do the documents identify as the main causes of police misconduct towards the public and within the service?
2. How is the system of police accountability organised in England and Wales?
3. Which laws and regulations govern officers who commit misconduct?
4. What are the benefits of the current oversight system?
5. What challenges does the current oversight system face?
6. What suggestions do the documents make for improving the system and police credibility?

Questions 2 and 3 are answered mainly in Section 2. The findings in Section 6 address Questions 1, 4 and 5, and Question 6 is taken up in the discussion.

5.2 Selection of Documents

Documents were selected purposively. To be included, a document had to be publicly available, to be produced by an official, statutory or independent body, to deal directly with police complaints, misconduct, vetting or oversight in the United Kingdom, and to have been published between 2017 (the year of the Policing and Crime Act) and January 2026. I searched the websites of the IOPC, the Home Office, HMICFRS, the MPS, the Scottish Government and GOV.UK, and followed citations from one document to the next. Older landmark reports, such as the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, were used as background only. Legislation and case law were analysed doctrinally rather than coded. The final corpus contained 22 documents, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Documents Analysed in the Study (N = 22)

Document type	Documents (in-text citation)	n	Main use in the analysis
Official statistics	IOPC police complaints statistics 2020/21 to 2024/25 (IOPC, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2025c, 2025d); Home Office police misconduct statistics, years ending March 2024 and 2025 (Home Office, 2025c, 2026)	7	Volume, handling routes, allegation types, timeliness and outcomes
Oversight body publications	IOPC annual report and accounts 2023/24 (IOPC, 2025a); IOPC public perceptions tracker 2024/25 (IOPC, 2025e); IOPC decisions on the Chris Kaba case (IOPC, 2025b, 2026)	4	Independent investigations, cost, learning recommendations, public confidence
Inquiries and independent reviews	Jones (2017); Daniel Morgan Independent Panel (2021); Angiolini (2020, 2024); Casey (2022, 2023); Godwin and Fulford (2025)	7	Causes of misconduct, culture, vetting failures, delay, use-of-force test

Document type	Documents (in-text citation)	n	Main use in the analysis
Inspection reports	HMICFRS (2022), An inspection of vetting, misconduct, and misogyny in the police service	1	Vetting standards, misconduct handling, misogyny
Government policy statements	Home Office (2024, 2025a, 2025b)	3	Reform agenda and its justifications

Note. IOPC = Independent Office for Police Conduct; HMICFRS = His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services. Legislation and case law (Police Reform Act 2002; Police (Conduct) Regulations 2020; R (W80) v Director General of the IOPC, 2023, and others) were analysed doctrinally and are not counted in the corpus. Full details of each document are given in the References.

5.3 Data Analysis

The analysis followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. I read each document in full or, for the very long reports, read the summary, conclusions and the chapters dealing with complaints, misconduct and vetting. Passages were coded in a coding matrix organised around the research questions (a deductive starting point), while new codes were added whenever the material did not fit the existing ones (an inductive step). For example, codes such as "delay", "repeat subjects" and "low-level complaints" were present from the start, while "officer anonymity" and "chair of hearings" were added during coding. Codes were then grouped into themes and checked against the full documents to make sure that the themes were not resting on a single source. For the statistical publications, I extracted the headline figures directly from the published reports and did not recalculate them, except where I state otherwise.

5.4 Reflexivity and Ethics

Two cautions should be stated at the outset. First, documents are not neutral. Inquiry reports are written to persuade, statistics are shaped by how forces record cases, and government papers present policy in the best light. I have tried to read the documents against each other and to note where they disagree. Second, I approach the topic as a graduate student from outside the United Kingdom, and some of my assumptions came from the Pakistani context. In some respects this helped, because it made me notice features of the British system, such as published learning recommendations, that British writers tend to take for granted. Because the study used only publicly available documents and involved no human participants, formal ethics approval was not required.

6. Findings

The themes identified in the analysis are summarised in Table 2 and discussed below. I begin with what the documents say about the causes of misconduct, then turn to the challenges facing the oversight system, and end with its benefits.

Table 2

Themes Identified in the Documentary Analysis

Research question	Theme	Sub-themes and codes	Main sources
Causes (RQ1)	Culture, vetting and supervision	Tolerance of misogyny, racism and bullying; "banter"; weak vetting and re-vetting; repeat subjects not acted on; misuse of information	Casey (2022, 2023); Angiolini (2024); HMICFRS (2022); Home Office (2026)
Challenges (RQ5)	A fragmented and layered system	Three UK models; informal, local, directed and independent routes; small share of cases reaching the IOPC; contested decisions	IOPC (2025a, 2025c, 2026); Angiolini (2020)
	Slow processing of cases	Rising formal handling times; long misconduct timelines; officers and families left waiting	IOPC (2021, 2025d); Home Office (2026); Casey (2022)
	Burden of minor complaints	Growth in complaint volume; informal handling; risk of missing serious cases at assessment	IOPC (2025d); Casey (2022); HMICFRS (2022)
	Culture and resistance to oversight	Fear of reporting colleagues; racial disparity in misconduct; firearms officers and the use-of-force test	Casey (2022, 2023); Home Office (2024, 2025a); IOPC (2026)
	Outcomes and return on investment	Cost of oversight; rising dismissals; low proportion of upheld complaints; follow-up of recommendations	IOPC (2025a, 2025c, 2025e); Home Office (2025c, 2026)
Benefits (RQ4)	Independence, transparency and learning	Independent IOPC investigations; public hearings and barred list; published statistics; learning recommendations; responsiveness to failure	IOPC (2025a); Savage (2013); Home Office (2024)

Note. RQ = research question (see Section 5.1). Themes were developed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Sources listed are those that most clearly evidence each theme, not an exhaustive list.

6.1 Why Officers Misbehave: Culture, Vetting and Supervision

None of the documents treats misconduct as simply the work of a few "bad apples". The strongest theme across the inquiries and inspections is that misconduct grows in an environment that tolerates it. Casey (2023) described a culture in which bullying, misogyny and racism were not acknowledged by the institution, and in which those who raised concerns faced a backlash. The Angiolini Inquiry (2024) similarly warned that offenders like Couzens will continue to go undetected where degrading behaviour is normalised as "banter".

The second cause is weak gatekeeping. HMICFRS (2022) found that some applicants with criminal records or links to organised crime had been allowed to join, and that warning signs were not always acted on once officers were in post. Angiolini (2024) showed in detail how this played out in one career: Kent Police refused Couzens vetting clearance in 2008, yet he remained a special constable, and the 2015 indecent exposure report never led to an investigation. Reading these reports together, I was struck by how often the information that could have prevented harm already existed somewhere in the system but was not connected.

The third cause is weak supervision and a reluctance to act on repeat behaviour. Casey's (2022) interim report found that 20% (1,809) of MPS officers and staff who had faced a misconduct case had been involved in more than one, and that only 13 of those 1,809 people (0.71%) had been dismissed. Forty-one officers had faced between six and 19 separate cases. As one of the report's headings put it, the misconduct process "does not find and discipline officers with repeated" patterns of behaviour (p. 10).

The national statistics point in the same direction. In the year ending March 2025, "discreditable conduct" was the largest category of allegation in misconduct proceedings, making up 31% of allegations, and allegations about the improper access or disclosure of information rose by 43%, from 915 to 1,309 (Home Office, 2026). In the complaints system, most allegations concern the basic delivery of service rather than abuse of power: in 2024/25, 54% of allegations related to the delivery of duties and service, 21% to police powers, policies and procedures, and 12% to individual behaviours (IOPC, 2025d). Much of what the public complains about, in other words, is poor service rather than misconduct in the disciplinary sense, a point I return to below.

6.2 Challenges: A Fragmented and Layered System

Stelkia (2020) found that the most frequently mentioned challenge in British Columbia was a two-tier system, with different rules for municipal police and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The UK has a version of the same problem, but with more layers. At the national level there are three separate oversight models in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, each with its own legislation and powers. Within England and Wales, a complaint may be handled informally by a force, formally recorded and handled by the PSD, investigated locally, directed by the IOPC, or investigated independently. Reviews may go to the local policing body or the IOPC. Misconduct proceedings are then decided by a panel chaired, since 2024, by the force's own chief officer.

The scale of the different layers is very uneven. In 2023/24 the IOPC received 7,058 referrals from forces, but it started only 281 core independent investigations and completed 303 (IOPC, 2025a). In the same year forces logged 85,458 complaint cases (IOPC, 2025c). In practice, then, the large majority of complaints never involve the independent body at all. This is not necessarily wrong, since most complaints concern minor service failures, but it does mean that the "independent" element that the public hears about is a small part of the system that most complainants actually meet. The tracker finding that only a quarter of the public sees the IOPC as completely independent (IOPC, 2025e) should be read in that light.

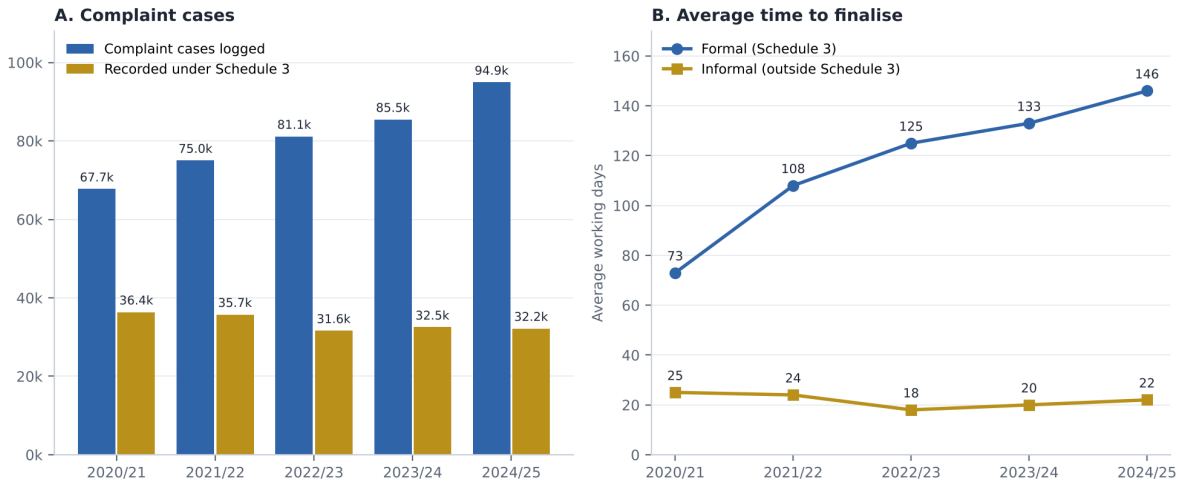
The documents also show tensions between the layers. The pause of the gross misconduct proceedings against Sergeant Blake in January 2026 followed a request from the MPS to withdraw the case in light of the planned change to the legal test (IOPC, 2026). Whatever one thinks of the merits, the episode shows how a single case can be pulled between the oversight body, the force, the courts and the government, and how difficult it is for families and the public to know who is responsible for a decision.

6.3 Challenges: Slow Processing of Complaints and Misconduct Cases

Delay is the challenge that appears in almost every document in the corpus. The IOPC's statistics show that the average time taken to finalise a formally recorded complaint rose from 73 working days in 2020/21 to 146 working days in 2024/25, roughly doubling in four years, while informal complaints continued to be finalised in around three to five weeks (IOPC, 2021, 2025d). Over the same period, the number of complaint cases logged rose by 40%, from 67,732 to 94,940 (see Figure 2). The number of cases recorded under Schedule 3 actually fell slightly, from 36,365 to 32,172, which suggests that the growth in volume was absorbed mainly by informal handling, while the formal cases that remained took longer.

Figure 2

Police Complaints in England and Wales, 2020/21 to 2024/25



Note. Panel A shows complaint cases logged by forces and local policing bodies and the number formally recorded under Schedule 3 of the Police Reform Act 2002. Panel B shows the average number of working days taken to finalise complaint cases handled formally (under Schedule 3) and informally (outside Schedule 3). Data from IOPC annual police complaints statistics (IOPC, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2025c, 2025d). The IOPC describes these statistics as experimental.

Misconduct cases take longer still. The Home Office's (2026) statistics for the year ending March 2025 show a median of 210 calendar days to finalise all cases, up from 187 the year before. The median rose to 405 days for recordable conduct matters and 428 days for complaints investigated under special procedures, which are the more serious cases. Casey (2022) found that MPS misconduct allegations took on average around 400 days from allegation to outcome, and nearly 350 days even when IOPC cases were excluded, and that around 17% of allegations made between 2013 and 2019 had taken more than two years to finalise.

The IOPC's own investigations have become quicker. In 2023/24, 83% of its core investigations were completed within 12 months, close to its target of 85% (IOPC, 2025a). Yet a year is still a long time for a family waiting for answers or for an officer who may be suspended or on restricted duties throughout. The government's decision to allow the IOPC to send a file to the Crown Prosecution Service as soon as there is sufficient evidence, without waiting for the final report, is a direct response to this problem (Home Office, 2025b).

Delay matters for the same reasons that Stelkia's (2020) participants gave in Canada. A sanction imposed years after the event loses much of its corrective effect, and long delays tell the public that the system does not take misconduct seriously. In my reading, the documents also show a less obvious cost: delay feeds the mistrust of officers and staff, who see colleagues left in post for long periods while cases drag on (Casey, 2022).

6.4 Challenges: The Administrative Burden of Minor Complaints

The 2020 reforms were partly a response to the concern that the system spent too much time on minor matters. The figures suggest that the reforms changed how complaints are handled more than how many arrive. In 2024/25, forces logged 94,940 complaint cases containing 168,249 allegations, yet only about a third of cases (32,172) were formally recorded under Schedule 3 (IOPC, 2025d). The remainder were handled outside Schedule 3, usually by explaining, apologising or putting something right.

In principle this is sensible. A person who complains that an officer was rude or that a call was not returned usually wants an explanation and an apology, not a disciplinary investigation. The informal route is also quicker. The difficulty is that the line between a minor service complaint and a sign of something more

serious is not always clear at the start. Casey (2022) found that allegations involving sexual misconduct or breaches of equality and diversity standards were less likely than other allegations to result in a case to answer (29% and 20% respectively, against 33% overall), and that the recording of these categories was weakest, which means that the cases most likely to be lost in the system are also the ones that matter most. HMICFRS (2022) likewise found cases that should have been assessed as gross misconduct but were not. Handling minor complaints efficiently is a benefit, but only if the early assessment is good enough to spot the cases that are not minor.

6.5 Challenges: Police Culture and Resistance to Oversight

Stelkia (2020) found pockets of resistance to civilian oversight among British Columbia officers, many of whom felt that civilians could not understand operational decisions. The UK documents show a similar theme, but in two different forms.

The first is internal resistance to challenge. Casey (2022, 2023) described officers and staff who feared the consequences of reporting colleagues and a system that complainants found "stacked against them" (Casey, 2022, p. 8). Casey (2022) also found significant racial disparity in the misconduct system itself: Black officers and staff in the MPS were 81% more likely than White colleagues to receive a misconduct allegation in the most recent year studied, and Asian officers and staff 55% more likely. A system that is seen as harsh on some groups and lenient on others, and slow to act on predatory behaviour, will not command the respect of the officers it is meant to regulate.

The second form is collective resistance to external scrutiny of the use of force. After Sergeant Blake was charged with murder in September 2023, a number of MPS firearms officers stepped back from armed duties (ITV News, 2023), and the then government began the accountability review that led to the reforms described in Section 4 (Home Office, 2024). Supporters of the reforms argue that officers who make split-second decisions under threat need a clear and fair legal test. Critics, including campaigners for the Kaba family, argue that applying the criminal law test in misconduct proceedings will make it harder to hold officers to account for unreasonable mistakes. I do not think the documents allow a firm conclusion on this question, but they do show that the relationship between the police and their overseers in England and Wales remains what one of Stelkia's (2020) participants called a "healthy tension", and one that can easily become unhealthy.

6.6 Challenges: Outcomes, Costs and Return on Investment

The IOPC had net expenditure of £75.0 million and an average of 991 full-time equivalent staff in 2023/24 (IOPC, 2025a), and each force runs its own PSD, counter-corruption and vetting units. It is reasonable to ask what this investment produces. The documents offer a mixed answer.

On one measure, outcomes have changed sharply. The number of officers referred to misconduct proceedings rose from 1,312 in the year ending March 2024 (Home Office, 2025c) to 1,687 in the year ending March 2025, and the number dismissed rose from 563 to 695 (Home Office, 2026). Dismissals remained at about 0.4% of the officer workforce. Accelerated hearings, used where the evidence is clear, ended in dismissal in 92% of cases. These figures suggest that forces, especially after the Casey and Angiolini reports, have become more willing to remove officers.

On other measures the picture is less clear. Only a minority of investigated complaints end with a finding against the police: in 2023/24, the service was found not acceptable in 12% of allegations investigated outside special procedures (IOPC, 2025c). Public confidence in the fairness of complaint handling has improved only slightly (IOPC, 2025e). Like the participants in Stelkia's (2020) study, the documents struggle to show whether oversight deters misconduct or simply processes it after the event. The IOPC's learning recommendations are one attempt to answer this: in 2023/24 it issued 133 recommendations, and 94% of those with a response were accepted (IOPC, 2025a). Whether accepted recommendations change practice on the ground is, however, rarely followed up in the public record.

6.7 Benefits of the Current Oversight System

Despite these challenges, the documents also identify real strengths. The first is independence at the serious end. Since 2018 the IOPC has had its own investigators, its own power to begin an investigation without waiting for a referral and, in its own investigations, the decision on whether there is a case to answer. Savage (2013) argued that independence depends not only on structure but on the way investigators think and work, and the shift from the IPCC to the IOPC was meant to strengthen both.

The second benefit is transparency. Misconduct hearings have generally been held in public since 2015, outcomes are published, and dismissed officers are placed on a barred list. The annual complaint and misconduct statistics, although still labelled as experimental or "in development", allow anyone to follow trends across all 43 forces. The very fact that this study could be done from public documents is evidence of a level of transparency that, in my experience, is not found in many other systems.

The third benefit is learning. The 2020 reforms put the emphasis on reflective practice and organisational learning for lower-level failings, and the IOPC's learning recommendations and published case studies give forces a route to change practice without waiting for a disciplinary outcome. Finally, the system has shown that it can respond to failure. Within roughly three years of the murder of Sarah Everard, the vetting and misconduct rules were reviewed, the chair of misconduct hearings was changed, dismissals increased and statutory vetting standards were announced. One may disagree with some of these reforms, but the system has not stood still.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The UK model of police oversight, at least in England and Wales, has strengths that many countries would envy: an independent investigator, published data, public hearings and an active reform agenda. Yet the documentary record shows that it faces serious challenges. The most important are a fragmented and layered structure that most complainants experience mainly through their own local force, slow processing of formal complaints and misconduct cases, the difficulty of separating genuinely minor complaints from early warning signs, a police culture that has tolerated discriminatory and predatory behaviour and is wary of external scrutiny, and uncertainty about whether the system's cost produces better behaviour and greater public confidence.

These findings are strikingly similar to those Stelkia (2020) reported for British Columbia, even though the data sources and the legal systems are different. In both places, delay, the burden of minor complaints, resistance to oversight and doubts about return on investment were central. This suggests that these challenges may be structural features of police oversight in common law democracies rather than local failings. Where the UK differs is in the scale of its recent crisis and in the sharpness of its reform agenda.

7.1 Suggestions for Reform

Drawing on the documents, and on the questions with which I began, I offer five suggestions.

1. Treat vetting as continuous, not a one-off event. The HMICFRS (2022) and Angiolini (2024) findings show that information that could have prevented harm was often already held by the police. Statutory vetting standards should include regular re-vetting and a clear duty to act on new adverse information.
2. Set and publish time standards for each stage of the complaints and misconduct process, and report performance against them by force, so that delay becomes visible and can be managed.
3. Strengthen the early assessment of complaints so that allegations involving sexual misconduct, discrimination or repeat behaviour are never handled informally without review, and so that repeat subjects are identified automatically.
4. Follow up learning recommendations. The IOPC and HMICFRS should jointly report on whether accepted recommendations have changed practice, which would begin to answer the question of return on investment.
5. Monitor the effect of the 2024 to 2026 reforms. The change to chief officers chairing hearings and the move to a criminal law test for use of force could each affect outcomes and public confidence. Their effects should be evaluated openly, with data published on hearing outcomes before and after each change.

7.2 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it relies entirely on documents written by others, and the findings are therefore shaped by what those bodies chose to examine and publish. The Casey reviews in particular deal with the MPS, the largest force, and may not represent the position in smaller forces. Second, the official statistics are experimental and depend on how forces record complaints and misconduct, so trends should be read with care. Third, the study concentrates on England and Wales and says relatively little about Scotland and Northern Ireland. Finally, the reforms are still being implemented, and some of the documents analysed here may soon be out of date.

8. Future Research

Future research could build on this study in several ways. Interviews with complainants, PSD investigators, IOPC staff and officers who have been through misconduct proceedings would add the lived experience that documentary analysis cannot capture, and would allow a closer comparison with Stelkia's (2020) interview-based study. A comparative study of the three UK oversight models, especially the Northern Ireland Police Ombudsman, which investigates all complaints independently, would help to show whether greater independence produces greater confidence. Researchers could also examine the effect of the May 2024 change in who chairs misconduct hearings on outcomes, and track whether the move to a criminal law test for use of force changes how such cases are decided. Finally, case studies of long-running misconduct cases could help to identify where, exactly, delay builds up in the system and what could be done about it.

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