



INTRODUCTION

This report seeks to critically evaluate specialist police investigative units who hold the primary role of investigating sexual abuse cases to determine whether this is the best and most cost-effective response for victims of child sexual abuse.

The authors of this report present a comprehensive, systematic review of 27 international literature articles from English speaking countries for the purpose of critically evaluating:

- what is known about the efficacy of specialist police investigative units compared to traditional responses
- what features of specialist units might determine their effectiveness.

KEY LEARNINGS

Overall, the findings of this report indicate that, 23 out of 27 evaluations of the specialist investigative units found that these units resulted in a more effective police response than traditional approaches. This improvement was reflected in the four main categories measured in the following evaluations:

1. victim satisfaction
2. professional stakeholder satisfaction
3. investigative process and
4. investigation outcomes.

In general, the systematic review revealed that special units either improved outcomes in these measures or left them unchanged (that is, they did not have negative consequences).

The authors state that the inadequacies in the design of these evaluations made it difficult to draw clear conclusions about the efficacy of specialist units. In particular it is noted that, the direct comparison studies only related to four of the 11 different specialist units, all of which were multi-agency centres. This small number made it impossible to delineate which features of the specialist units made them more or less effective. The features of each unit and the measures of each evaluation also varied: some involved multi-agency responses while others involved a police-only specialist response; there were different levels of training, types of co-location, and referral processes.

Victim satisfaction

In terms of victim satisfaction, the qualitative surveys and interviews with adult victims and the families of child victims evaluated in this review suggest that these participants were more satisfied with a specialist unit than a traditional response. However, in relation to studies examining child satisfaction, this review found that there were too few to draw any conclusions about this group.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

TITLE

‘A systematic review of the efficacy of specialist police investigative units in responding to child sexual abuse’

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KEY FOCUS

This report provides a comprehensive, systematic review of the international literature, critically evaluating the efficacy of specialist police investigative units in responding to child sexual abuse.

KEY OBJECTIVES

The report evaluates what is known about the efficacy of specialist police investigative units compared to traditional responses; and what features of specialist units might determine their effectiveness.

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Overall, the findings indicated that the specialist units recorded higher victim participation levels compared to traditional responses, but findings as to how this affected reporting rates to police were unclear. Positive results from specialist unit involvement included the victim feeling valued by police, having greater privacy and having improved access to services. However, some victims were still concerned about negative police attitudes and lengthy delays in investigations.

Professional stakeholder satisfaction

The author's evaluation of qualitative surveys and interviews suggest that professional stakeholders strongly support specialist units as opposed to a more traditional response. Professional stakeholders mostly cited improved response effectiveness and increased job satisfaction as the main benefits. Furthermore, they supported the need to co-locate agencies and a deliver service by way of a collaborative approach between agencies.

Investigative process

This review revealed that cases involving specialist units reported higher rates of police, Child Protective Services (CPS) and medical service involvement compared to cases dealt with via traditional responses. The extent of delays in investigation times did not change, but professional stakeholders suggested that specialist unit involvement improved the timeliness and ease with which victims were able to access services. The authors conclude that there is insufficient research to conclusively determine the influence of specialist units on the quality of investigation.

Investigation outcomes

Another key finding within this review is that specialist units recorded higher arrest rates and numbers of charges compared to traditional responses. However, the authors state that there was not enough evidence to draw any conclusions about how specialist units influence prosecution and conviction rates, or sentence length.

Challenges

This review identified that across all studies reviewed, four common themes consistently arose regarding the challenges inhibiting the effectiveness of specialist units:

- (1) insufficient resources (including staffing) to meet the high workload;
- (2) inadequate quality of leadership, management and personnel;
- (3) insufficient training for unit staff; and
- (4) ineffective multi-agency collaboration.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review provides an evidence base to suggest that specialist units, especially in the form of multi-agency centres, can improve police responsiveness to complainants who allege child sexual abuse. However, the authors conclude with the recommendation that a more systematic and robust evaluation of the efficacy of specialist units is required to determine the extent to which they improve the quality of investigations and prosecutions in these cases, and to identify the features that make these units effective.