



**CHALLENGES WORKING AS AN
INFILTRATOR AND INFORMANT**
- A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Background: Infiltrators and informants operate undercover, often finding themselves immersed in various exposed situations. Aim: To determine the challenges in the roles faced by infiltrators and informants. Method: A literature review was conducted with five articles sourced from ProQuest and PsycInfo. Each article underwent analysis using a five-step model. Results: criminals exhibit resistance techniques and possess extensive knowledge of the methodologies used by infiltrators and informants. Lack of adequate support, coupled with prevalent feelings of stress and anxiety were frequently reported. Conclusion: the findings underscore the challenges faced by both infiltrators and informants, highlighting the need for enhanced support for well being and workstructures.

Key words:

Challenges, Experiences, Infiltrator, Informant, Undercover operations.

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INTRODUCTION

In law enforcement, the use of infiltrators and informants has become an increasingly common and strategic crime prevention technique. These individuals often operate in the shadows, hidden from public awareness, yet their contributions are critical in the fight against crime and in maintaining public safety. An infiltrator is someone who works undercover, gaining the trust of criminals to gather crucial information. This role is inherently challenging and requires specific qualities, as the risk of exposure is significant. Nevertheless, infiltrators are vital to law enforcement efforts. The practice of using infiltrators dates back to the 18th century in France, where it was employed to protect national resources and security. Over time, other countries recognized the advantages of undercover work and adopted similar methods (Olhagen, 1998).

An informant, on the other hand, is an individual who voluntarily provides crucial information to law enforcement or other organizations. In exchange, informants typically receive protection, payment, or other benefits. Like infiltrators, informants play a critical role in crime prevention, often collecting vital intelligence on criminal organizations, their members, resources, plans, and procedures. This information can be invaluable to police authorities, but informants face significant risks and often require extensive legal protection (Jenzen, 1990).

While the roles of infiltrators and informants are essential, they are also fraught with numerous challenges that can impact their effectiveness and well-being. Despite their importance, there is a need for a comprehensive understanding of the specific difficulties these individuals encounter in their operations. The significance of this study lies in its aim to address this gap by systematically reviewing the challenges faced by infiltrators and informants. By synthesizing findings from multiple studies across different countries, this review will provide a detailed analysis of the psychological, ethical, and operational dilemmas inherent in undercover work. Understanding these challenges is crucial not only for improving the effectiveness of crime prevention strategies but also for ensuring the safety and mental well-being of those involved in such high-risk roles. Despite the operational importance of undercover work, there is a lack of comprehensive research on the mental health consequences and work-related stressors that affect these officers.

Existing literature on police work has identified various stressors associated with the profession, such as long hours, exposure to violence, and the pressure to meet organizational demands. However, the specific challenges faced by undercover officers have not been as thoroughly explored. Miller (2006), for example, discusses the psychological and operational complexities of undercover policing, noting the emotional toll that sustained deception can have on officers. Similarly, Curran (2021) highlights the well-being of former covert officers, pointing out that many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression long after their undercover work has ended. These psychological challenges are exacerbated by the fact that undercover officers often lack the necessary organizational support to cope with their experiences.

Research on the work environment of police officers in general emphasizes the importance of support systems in managing stress and maintaining mental health. However, undercover officers operate under additional pressures that may not be

addressed by traditional organizational structures. Amir (2003) and Hess & Amir (2002) discuss the absence of adequate psychological support for undercover agents, particularly in drug enforcement, where the risks are higher, and the demands are greater. Without appropriate support mechanisms, officers may feel isolated and unsupported, which can lead to burnout and diminished effectiveness in their roles. The ethical implications of undercover policing also contribute to the psychological strain experienced by officers. Nathan (2017) explores the moral dilemmas that arise from engaging in deception and manipulation as part of undercover operations. These ethical concerns, coupled with the stress of maintaining a false identity, can lead to long-term psychological effects, further complicating the mental health challenges faced by undercover officers.

Given the lack of extensive research in this field, this study aims to fill a gap by examining the work environment and mental health consequences of undercover policing. By doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of the challenges these officers face and offers insights into potential interventions and support mechanisms that could mitigate the negative effects of undercover work.

AIM

The aim of this study is to conduct a literature review that examines the specific challenges faced by police infiltrators and informants in their operational roles. This includes analyzing the psychological, ethical, and logistical difficulties they encounter while gathering intelligence, as well as the impact these challenges have on their effectiveness and personal well-being. The study will also explore the strategies used by infiltrators and informants to navigate these challenges and the implications for law enforcement practices.

METHOD

This research is based on a systematic literature review, involving the collection and analysis of existing data. The materials used are sourced from databases that provide peer-reviewed scientific publications, specifically ProQuest and Psycinfo.

Literature review

The literature review began with broad information searches using keywords such as "police spies," "undercover police," "infiltrator," "informant," and "police spy." Following these general searches, more systematic searches were conducted to identify literature relevant to the research. The process started with an "Advanced" search in ProQuest, which was then mirrored in Psycinfo. The searches were limited to peer-reviewed material published between 1990 and 2024, ensuring that both recent and slightly older studies were considered. This time frame was chosen to balance the need for current research with the importance of including foundational studies.

Exclusion criteria were carefully applied throughout the process. Articles that did not directly address the purpose of the study, lacked relevant keywords, or did not contain themes pertinent to the research question were excluded. Additionally, articles that required purchase to access the full text were excluded to ensure the use of widely available sources. Conversely, inclusion criteria required that

articles explicitly mention undercover work, detail experiences or challenges faced by undercover officers, and employ qualitative methods. This approach ensured that the material selected directly aligned with the research focus.

Selection

In ProQuest, the initial search with the keyword “Infiltrators” yielded 1,041 articles. To widen the scope, the term “Informants” was also searched, resulting in 33,183 hits. A search for “Undercover Police” produced 275 articles. To refine the sample further, the terms “Infiltrators AND Informants” were combined, leading to 122 articles. Titles of these articles were reviewed for relevance, and 16 articles were selected for abstract review. Ultimately, four articles were read in full, and two were included in this study. A subsequent search in ProQuest with the keywords “Undercover Agent Qualitative” resulted in 198 hits, from which seven abstracts were reviewed, and one article was selected.

In Psycinfo, the keyword “Undercover operations” was used, limited to peer-reviewed material from 1990-2024, resulting in 31 articles. After reading all abstracts, two articles were selected for inclusion. Overall, only articles that clearly addressed challenges in undercover work and used qualitative research methods were included.

Analysis

Friberg’s (2017) five-step model was utilized for data analysis in this study. This model involves a comprehensive review of the selected literature to identify patterns and themes related to the challenges faced by undercover officers. The process began with multiple readings of each article to ensure a deep understanding of the content. Following this, the results from each article were compared to identify similarities and differences. These comparisons were used to develop categories and themes, which then formed the basis for further analysis. This iterative process, involving repeated reviews both individually and collectively, helped ensure the accuracy and depth of the analysis.

By applying this structured approach, the study aimed to uncover and categorize the specific challenges encountered by infiltrators and informants, ultimately contributing to a better understanding of their work environment and the associated psychological effects. An overview of specific literature that has been analyzed is included in the thesis (see appendix C).

Ethics

The selected scientific articles in this study contain interviews conducted with both former infiltrators, informants and ex-criminals. The information about the participants that has appeared on the articles has contained good ethical considerations, the participants have not been described in a way that risks them being revealed, this study has carefully ensured that participants' integrity has been taken into account during the course of the studies. Scientific material that has breached their ethical approach has been excluded in this study. In the selected studies, their ethical considerations have emerged as well as consent from

participants, which has been important in the process of choosing suitable studies for the purpose. To further protect participant privacy, this study has chosen not to highlight specific participants by their designation name. Magalhaes (2024) emphasizes the importance of professional research behavior which includes doing research based on good ethical approaches, responsibility, respect and reciprocity should be a starting point for research. Gustafsson et al. (2005) points out the importance of how the research is presented, the starting point should be to convey findings, thus it is essential that results are not distorted or in any way biased, a good ethical practice is free from such references which this study has related to.

RESULTS

The results are presented in two categories and four subcategories which describe different challenges within the undercover work. The categories that emerged were *Opposition* and *Personal influence*.

Categories	Subcategories
Opposition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drug dealer strategies - Law enforcement strategies - Workplace environment
Personal influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Health and well-being

Opposition

This category addresses the resistance and countermeasures faced by undercover officers and informants from both drug dealers and within law enforcement agencies, as well as the challenges in their workplace environments.

Drug dealer strategies

Drug dealers exhibit a high level of awareness regarding law enforcement tactics, particularly those used to convert individuals into informants. One study (Jacobs, 1993) highlights how drug dealers scrutinize irregular behaviors among buyers to identify potential informants. For example, drug dealers become suspicious when known buyers suddenly introduce new people, often presented as “cousins” or “fishing buddies.” This strategy is designed to avoid selling drugs to informants. Additionally, dealers become wary when individuals suddenly increase their drug purchases, as this shift in behavior may indicate informant activity.

Drug dealers also develop a "perceptual shorthand" to identify undercover officers by looking for signs that betray their law enforcement background, such as an absence of visible drug use or overly formal behavior. Undercover agents often have to adjust their appearance and behavior to mask these signs and blend in more effectively (Jacobs, 1993).

Law enforcement strategies

Infiltrators and informants often adapt strategies to blend into criminal networks, such as altering their appearance or exaggerating their eagerness to purchase drugs to build trust (Cajada et al., 2024). Informants are encouraged to request larger drug quantities to push drug dealers to contact their superiors, thereby helping law enforcement target higher-level distributors. However, the high probability of exposure remains a constant concern, as criminals are increasingly aware of law enforcement techniques.

Undercover officers also struggle with maintaining their fabricated identities, as lying and acting convincingly are difficult in high-stress situations. Some officers cope by fully internalizing their undercover personas to maintain consistency in their behavior (Cajada et al., 2024).

Workplace environment

The workplace environment for undercover officers is a significant source of stress, often stemming from insufficient support from supervisors and colleagues. Some officers reported feeling pressured to accept assignments, fearing negative consequences if they refused (Martinez, 2023). Others found that their supervisors lacked the necessary understanding and training to provide effective support, leaving them feeling unprepared for their assignments (Martinez, 2023; Curran, 2021).

Moreover, undercover officers often face stereotyping from their supervisors, which limits opportunities for certain assignments and negatively impacts job satisfaction. The lack of psychological support was consistently cited as a major issue, with agents expressing the need for guidance and debriefing sessions to help them manage the emotional toll of their work (Cajada et al., 2024)

Personal influence

This category focuses on the personal challenges faced by undercover officers and informants, particularly in relation to their health, well-being, and personal lives.

Health and well-being

The psychological impact of undercover work is profound, particularly for informants who must reintegrate into society after their roles end. Informants often experience isolation, fear, and family strain. Programs designed to help with reintegration such as rehabilitation for substance abuse, housing assistance, and employment support play a crucial role in their recovery (Hess & Amir, 2002).

For undercover agents, maintaining secrecy both professionally and personally is crucial but challenging. Many agents reported feeling distrustful of colleagues and found it difficult to separate their undercover lives from their personal lives. This secrecy also strained family relationships, as agents were unable to discuss the risks and pressures of their work with loved ones (Cajada et al., 2024).

Additionally, irregular work schedules made it difficult to maintain a structured personal life, further exacerbating feelings of stress and isolation.

The constant threat of exposure and the fear of violence have a significant negative impact on undercover agents' mental health. One study found that agents commonly experience paranoia, anxiety, and fear, with some reporting near-death experiences during operations (Curran, 2021). Female undercover agents, in particular, expressed concerns about sexual assault during assignments. Knowledge of colleagues who had been victims of violence heightened these fears (Curran, 2021).

Undercover work often leads to identity crises, as agents struggle to maintain multiple personas while preserving their true identities. Some agents used aggression or manipulation to navigate challenging situations, while others struggled to switch between their real and undercover selves, leading to confusion and stress (Curran, 2021). The lack of recognition for their work, both within the police force and from society at large, further contributed to feelings of frustration and isolation (Cajada et al., 2024).

Undercover agents employed various coping mechanisms to manage the psychological strain of their work. Humor, physical activity such as yoga, and alcohol were common strategies for dealing with stress. Some agents relied on the support of family and friends, while others sought solitude to reflect on their assignments. Despite these personal efforts, many agents stressed the need for formal psychological support to help them cope with the unique challenges of undercover work (Curran, 2021; Cajada et al., 2024).

DISCUSSION

Results Discussion

The findings of this study present a complicated picture of the challenges faced by infiltrators and informants in their undercover roles, revealing a landscape filled with both significant hurdles and possible ways to improve.

At the core of undercover work is the need to maintain one's cover, which is full of difficulties. On one hand, the ability to navigate dangerous situations highlights the resourcefulness and adaptability of undercover agents. As shown by Jacobs (1993), drug dealers have become very aware of the tactics used by undercover operatives, which illustrates the high stakes involved. This creates a situation where the skills that help agents do their jobs well also put them at risk of being discovered. The constant need to change their methods shows not only the cleverness of undercover agents but also the ongoing pressure they face to outsmart experienced criminals. However, this increased scrutiny from drug dealers can create a situation where even small mistakes can have serious consequences. Agents must constantly refine their behaviors and come up with unique approaches to avoid detection. This need for constant change can have both positive and negative effects. While it encourages creativity and quick thinking, it can also lead to mental fatigue and stress, as agents deal with the fear of being exposed.

The emotional burden of undercover work is another key finding, with agents often feeling isolated and anxious. The lack of proper support from management worsens these issues, revealing a significant gap in the support system that could help agents' mental health. Many participants felt abandoned and unprepared, suggesting that while the drive for success is strong, the absence of psychological support can hinder their effectiveness and overall well-being. Martinez (2023) and Kowalczyk and Sharps (2017) stress the need for ongoing psychological support, not just for the agents themselves but also for their families. Recognizing this need indicates a chance for positive change within law enforcement if resources are used effectively.

The results also highlight the mixed role of family support in undercover agents' lives. On the positive side, many agents valued the emotional backing from their families, which served as a crucial anchor during tough times. However, the secrecy involved in undercover work can create misunderstandings and mistrust at home, leading to strained relationships. The challenge of needing to hide important aspects of their lives from loved ones can increase feelings of loneliness and stress, presenting a significant challenge that needs careful attention in policy development.

Coping methods varied widely among participants, with some using unhealthy strategies, like drinking, while others found relief in exercise and humor. The positive use of humor, as noted by Bäcke and Hermansson (2014) and Svanberg and Lindqvist (2020), came up as an effective way to ease work-related stress, highlighting the importance of teamwork and shared experiences among agents. This finding suggests that organizations should encourage a supportive culture where healthy coping strategies are promoted. On the downside, relying on unhealthy coping methods can lead to long-term mental health issues, showing the urgent need for training on healthy stress management techniques. Focusing on resilience training and psychological support could be very helpful in promoting better mental health practices among undercover workers.

The results of this study stress the need for law enforcement agencies to rethink their support systems for undercover agents. Positive changes can be made by implementing comprehensive training programs that focus not only on how to work effectively but also on mental health. Additionally, introducing family support programs could strengthen relationships and reduce some of the psychological pressures that come with secrecy.

Method Discussion

Searches of scientific articles were conducted in two different databases, ProQuest and PsycInfo. The chosen articles were analyzed and reviewed using the CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) review template. In order to minimize bias and increase validity, the selected articles have been carefully reviewed and the data analysis has been carried out systematically. The selection was limited to articles published between the years 1990 and 2024. The author is aware that older relevant articles may have been missed, but considers that the time limit is sufficient to give a current picture of the research situation. The articles were chosen based on specific criteria, such as that they should be peer reviewed, written in English and be qualitative. The included articles come from the United

States, Israel, England, and Portugal, and the results of these studies have been found to be similar, strengthening the credibility of the findings. The included articles in this study span different years, from as early as 1993 to as late as 2024. This provides a breadth of perspective and approach that is valuable in understanding the evolution of the subject over time.

Older articles, such as those from 1993 and 2002, can offer historical context. Their long-term perspective can contribute to a deeper understanding of the subject's development and how previous research has shaped the current research area. However, older articles may be limited by lack of access to modern research methods and data. Methodological approaches and research practices have evolved over time, which can affect the validity and reliability of older studies. Thus, it is important to be aware of potential limitations and contextual factors that may influence the interpretation of their results. The newer articles from 2021 to 2024 may offer the latest research and current perspectives on the subject. Their topicality can be particularly valuable for understanding how the subject has developed in recent times and what new findings have emerged. Despite their timeliness, however, the newer articles may be subject to some limitations, such as a lack of long-term empirical validation or potential bias toward new trends or theories. The inclusion of articles from different years gives a balanced and diverse picture of the subject's development and relevance over time. By carefully weighing the pros and cons of the articles from different time periods, this study can draw on both historical continuity and current research to contribute to the understanding of the subject.

The data analysis was carried out with a thematic analysis to identify common patterns and themes in the results. A positive aspect of the selected articles is that they contain interviews in which both sexes are represented. This is significant because it provides a broader and more inclusive picture of the phenomena investigated. In addition, it has been of the utmost importance that the selected articles meet high ethical standards, which ensures that the research is conducted in a responsible and respectful manner. A potential weakness of the study may be the limited number of selected articles. This means that the results may not fully represent the entire field of research or capture all potential aspects of the subject. The limitation in the number of articles also means that the generalizability of the results may be limited, and that there may be other studies with relevant findings that have not been included. Despite this, the selected articles are judged to be of high quality and provide a solid basis for the analysis. Each article has undergone a review using the CASP template, ensuring that they meet high methodological standards. The selected articles have also been shown to have similar results despite different geographical and cultural contexts, which strengthens the credibility of the common findings.

The limited number of articles allows for a deeper and more detailed analysis of each study. By focusing on a smaller number of articles, it has been possible to carefully review and understand each study's methodology, results and conclusions in a more comprehensive way than would have been possible with a larger sample. The work as an infiltrator and informer can involve more challenges that have not been addressed in this study, challenges that are connected to the role of the legal system and how it can affect the application of undercover work. It is therefore important to note that more challenges, in addition to what emerged in this study, probably exist. Future research would

benefit from including more studies to provide a more comprehensive picture of the state of research and to further validate the findings. This could also help to identify any differences or new insights that were not discovered in this study. While the limited number of articles is a weakness of this study, the included articles are judged to provide a sufficient and stable basis for the conclusions drawn, while there is scope for future studies to further build on these findings.

CONCLUSION

Undercover work presents significant operational, personal, and psychological challenges for those involved. According to the findings, undercover officers describe their work environment as characterized by complex identity shifts and the constant risk of exposure, which leads to confusion and stress. These challenges are exacerbated by a lack of support from management and inadequate training, further complicating their duties. Many officers also report feelings of isolation and a lack of recognition, both within the organization and from society. Their work environment negatively affects personal relationships, particularly within the family, where the need for secrecy and irregular work schedules create tension and difficulties in re-integrating into private life.

The mental health consequences of these challenges are severe. Undercover officers report high levels of stress, anxiety, and fear of exposure or violence. To cope with these pressures, they often rely on informal strategies such as alcohol consumption, physical exercise, and humor, but the need for formal psychological support is clear. To improve the work environment and mitigate the mental health consequences, officers emphasize the importance of comprehensive support structures. These include adequate training, ongoing psychological care, and recognition of their efforts, alongside understanding and supportive management. By developing and implementing such measures, both the working conditions and the mental well-being of undercover officers can be significantly improved.

Practical implications

Employers should implement stable training programs that prepare infiltrators for the specific challenges they will face. These programs should include simulations of real-life situations and strategies for learning dealing with identity changes and risks of disclosure. Furthermore, it is critical to offer ongoing psychological support, including access to professional therapists who specialize in the unique challenges emerging in undercover work. Regular therapy sessions should be an integral part of the infiltrator's work routine. Supervisors should undergo training to better understand the specific needs and challenges of infiltrators. This may include courses in empathic leadership, psychological support and how to create a supportive work environment. To counter the feeling of lack of recognition, employers should develop systems to regularly recognize and reward the infiltrator's efforts. This can include both formal reward systems and informal recognition.

Employers should also offer support for the infiltrators and informants' families, such as family counseling and education about the risks and challenges of the job. Involving families in support processes can reduce tensions and improve

relationships. In order to help the infiltrator develop healthy coping strategies for dealing with stress and anxiety as well as mindfulness techniques, physical activity and healthy lifestyle choices, it is necessary that the organization offers resources for this. A culture of open communication should be applied within the organization where infiltrators feel safe to share their experiences and challenges. By implementing these practical measures, employers can create a more supportive and effective work environment for undercover agents, which in turn can lead to better work results and increased work motivation. These practical implications are necessary in order to develop the successfulness of undercover work and counteract setbacks within the justice system.

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APPENDICES

Systematic Search Results for ProQuest Database

This table summarizes the search results from ProQuest for relevant studies on undercover policing, including keywords used, number of hits, and selected articles. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles from 1990 to 2024.

Appendix A

Database/Date	Keywords	Hits	Titles Read	Abstracts Read	Articles Read	Selected Articles
Proquest Advanced 2024-02-24						
1.	Infiltrators	1041				
2.	Informants	33183				
3.	Undercover Police	275				
4	Infiltrators AND Informants	122	122	16	4	2
5	Undercover Agent Qualitative	198	198	7	2	1
Limitations: Peer reviewed 1990-2024						

Systematic Search Results for PsycInfo Database

This table details the search conducted in the PsycInfo database, focusing on the theme of undercover operations. It shows the keywords used, number of hits, and articles selected after title and abstract review. The search was filtered to peer-reviewed studies from 1990 to 2024.

Appendix B

Database/Date	Keywords	Hits	Titles Read	Abstracts Read	Articles Read	Selected Articles
PsycInfo 2024-03-10						
1.	Undercover operations	31	31	31	2	2
Limitations: Peer reviewed 1990-2024						

Overview of Analyzed Texts on Undercover Policing

This table provides an overview of analyzed texts regarding various aspects of undercover policing. It includes information on each study's author, publication details, country, aim, methodology, participants, and main findings.

Appendix C

Author Journal Year Country	Aim	Method	Participants	Results
Bruce A. Jacobs. Human Relations. 1993 United States	Exploring the perceptual shorthand dealers use to determine whether buyers in question are undercover.	Qualitative study	32 offenders in the drug trade were participating in this study, they all had several years of experience in drug dealing. The mean age was 48.	The result showed that drug dealers had a lot of knowledge about techniques used by undercover agents and informants, therefore they had counter techniques that were applied.
Cajada, L., Stephenson, Z. & Bishopp, D. J Police Crim Psych 2024 Portugal	To explore coping and detection avoidance strategies that enable police officers to be effective undercover operatives.	Qualitative study Semi-structured interviews were applied	25 police officers with undercover experiences were interviewed in this study (22 male and 3 female). The mean age was 40	The results showed that some participants found it difficult to remain secretive. Results also showed lack of support from the supervisor, fear of being uncovered, feelings of stress and a need for psychological support emerged.
Author Journal Year Country	Aim	Method	Participants	Results
Hess, A., & Amir, M. Substance Use & Misuse 2002 Israel	To examine the program of criminal undercover agents in the drug trade.	Qualitative analysis of undercover agent activities	Undercover agents	Different challenges and outcomes of undercover operations. Difficulties after assignments when reintegrating into society, need for after care and rehabilitation.

<p>Liam Scott Curran</p> <p>J Police Crim Psych</p> <p>2021</p> <p>United Kingdom</p>	<p>To outline and describe the existence of stressors within undercover policing and to understand the use of coping strategies to mitigate negative impacts on well-being.</p>	<p>Qualitative study</p> <p>Semi-structured interviews</p>	<p>Former police officers who have engaged in various forms of covert/undercover policing</p>	<p>Results showed that lack of knowledge affected the work.</p> <p>Participants experienced fear of being victimized and exposed to violence.</p> <p>Relationships were significantly for some participants. However it was difficult to convey working conditions to families</p> <p>Coping strategies like alcohol consumption, training and humor were applied.</p>
<p>Christopher Martinez</p> <p>J Police Crim Psych</p> <p>2023</p> <p>United States</p>	<p>To understand undercover officers and their perceptions of recruitment, assignment, and job satisfaction.</p>	<p>Qualitative study</p>	<p>Former undercover officers from the US Department of Homeland Security</p>	<p>Recruitment and assignment experiences varied. Some felt unsupported and unprepared. Lack of knowledge by supervisors which impacted the individual in their undercover work.</p>