

INTERNATIONAL WELL-BEING STUDY

The Psychological Health of Digital Forensic Investigators

A media briefing — for accurate, responsible coverage

SAMPLE	SCOPE	DATE	MEDIA CONTACT
N = 179	International	June 2026	Available for interview

THE STORY

Digital forensic investigators — the people who examine phones, computers and cloud data for evidence, including child sexual abuse material (CSAM) — are carrying clinically significant psychological distress with inadequate support. The Forensic Focus International Well-Being Study is the largest of its kind, using validated clinical measures across an international sample of 179 practitioners.

It also contains what is, to our knowledge, the first data on how investigators experience **AI-generated CSAM** — a fast-emerging challenge for law enforcement and the courts.

HEADLINE FIGURES

20%

reported clinically significant suicidal or self-harm ideation — around 4× the general-workforce rate

49%

receive no clinical or psychological supervision at all

61%

accessed no support service in the past year

28%

likely to leave the profession within 12 months

60%

find AI-generated CSAM as distressing as, or more than, real material

4–6×

ADHD (17%) and autism (10%) vs general-population rates

Please note: this is a suicide-related story. Wherever these figures are reported, please include support information and follow the responsible-reporting guidance on page 4.

SUGGESTED ANGLES

Four story directions the data supports, with the figures behind each.

■ **AI-generated CSAM — the emerging-tech hook**

Counter-intuitively, **60%** find AI-generated material as distressing as or *more* distressing than real material — investigators point to the human intent behind the prompts. **63%** worry about misidentifying real victims as AI-generated, a growing evidential and moral problem as the technology improves.

■ **A hidden workforce health crisis**

One in five investigators experiencing suicidal ideation, half with no clinical supervision — a duty-of-care gap in a frontline role most of the public never sees.

■ **Neurodivergence in the profession**

ADHD and autism appear at several times population rates, yet there is no research on how the role's stressors affect neurodivergent staff — an under-reported angle.

■ **Retention and capability**

More than a quarter may leave within a year, straining units already facing relentless caseloads.

QUOTABLE STATISTICS

Cleared for direct quotation. Please retain the comparative context where shown.

“One in five digital forensic investigators reported suicidal or self-harm thoughts at a clinically significant level — about four times the general-workforce rate.”

“Half receive no clinical or psychological supervision at all.”

“Sixty per cent found AI-generated abuse material as distressing as, or more distressing than, real material.”

RESPONSIBLE REPORTING — PLEASE READ

This story concerns suicide and exposure to child sexual abuse material. We ask that coverage:

- follows the **Samaritans media guidelines** (samaritans.org/media-guidelines) — avoiding sensationalist framing, prominent detail, or ‘epidemic / crisis-wave’ language;
- presents the suicide statistic **with its context** — the ~4× comparison — rather than in isolation;
- **includes support information** wherever the figures are reported (see below).

SUPPORT INFORMATION TO INCLUDE

UK: Samaritans — 116 123 (free, 24/7); Shout — text SHOUT to 85258. **US / Canada:** 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. **Australia:** Lifeline 13 11 14. **NZ:** 1737. A fuller international list is on the Forensic Focus well-being hub.

METHODOLOGY

Cross-sectional, anonymous, international online survey of 179 digital forensic investigators, using validated psychometric instruments (PCL-5, GAD-7, PHQ-9, PHQ-15, Brief Resilience Scale, Brief COPE, CTQ-SF) alongside bespoke modules on AI-generated CSAM and supervision. Conducted to academic research standards with embedded content warnings and crisis signposting.

ABOUT THE STUDY & AUTHOR

The study was authored by **Paul Gullon-Scott** BSc MA MSc MSc FMBPsS, Forensic Focus Well-Being Lead — a former digital forensic investigator with nearly 30 years' service (Northumbria Police) and a recognised expert on the mental-health impacts of this work. Paul is available for interview.

FOR MEDIA ENQUIRIES

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Full report: www.forensicfocus.com/well-being/forensic-focus-international-well-being-study-2026-report/

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