

**Precautionary policing and dispositives of risk in a police force control room in domestic abuse incidents: An ethnography of call handlers, dispatchers and response officers**

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**Precautionary Policing and Dispositives of Risk in a Police Force Control Room in  
Domestic Abuse Incidents: An Ethnography of Call Handlers, Dispatchers and  
Response Officers**

**Abstract**

This article explores the riskwork engaged in by call handlers, dispatchers and response officers in a police force control room in England. We present a novel approach by drawing on the work of Foucault and his concept *le dispositif* to study riskwork in policing in a post-austerity landscape and to develop the analytical concept of '*precautionary policing*'. Dispositional analysis allows us to focus on social dispositions or inclinations and to demonstrate how these arrangements affect social interaction and organizational behaviour. We draw on data collected via ethnographic fieldwork focusing on domestic abuse incidents in a police force control room in England. The findings focus on: 1) organizational technologies of risk, which guided and surfaced staff actions and decision-making; 2) riskwork to mitigate and manage threats and harm to victims and the public; and 3) riskwork relating to the professional decision-making of individual staff and officers. In addition to bringing the risk tools and artefacts 'into being' through their (inter-)actions, for staff, these technologies are a safety net to justify practices. They erode opportunities for officer discretion, particularly in relation to responses to domestic incidents. Therefore, despite policy discussions of the need to reduce officers' risk aversion and reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, a risk averse culture still pervades. Uncertainty becomes a justification for pre-emptive action by officers and staff before risks become known, and demonstrates a shift to precautionary policing practices which do not follow the blueprints of risk management.

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**Keywords:** domestic abuse, precautionary policing, risk, victims

## **Introduction**

This article explores the construction of everyday risks by police officers and staff in a police force control room (FCR) in England. By drawing on Foucault's concept of *le dispositif* (dispositive) we argue that police officer and staff negotiations with risk demonstrate a shift to what we term '*precautionary policing*'. Foucault's notion of *le dispositif* has been widely discussed in the social sciences (Agamben 2009, Deleuze 1992), in international relations and governmentality (Aradau & Van Munster 2007, Collier 2009), science and technology studies (Callon & Muniesa 2003), discourse theory and analysis (Jäger 2001), and studies of management and organizations (Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer & Thaning 2016). However, it has not yet been utilised by social scientists analysing policing and police occupational cultures. We offer the first application of Foucault's *le dispositif* to understand riskwork and precaution in policing, centring on the operations of a force control room in England focusing primarily on domestic abuse incidents. In doing so we develop the analytical concept of '*precautionary policing*' to discuss emerging police strategies for managing and mitigating risk/s in a post-austerity landscape. Aggeri defines *dispositif* as: 'the arrangement of heterogeneous material, cognitive and discursive elements designed to frame the behaviour of governed subjects and to guide it towards specific goals.' (2017, p. 42). The elements that compose *dispositif* include 'the said and the unsaid ... discursive and socio-material elements ... the speakable and the visible' (p. 40). Adopting a Foucauldian approach to understand risk allows us to focus on *how* risks are governed rather than whether they are calculable or incalculable.

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Risk management is viewed as a backbone of good governance in both the public and private sectors and as a cornerstone of modern management control (Huber & Scheytt 2013). Within policing, risk management has been identified as a driving feature of crime control. Since the early 1990s, policing has taken a future oriented and pro-active approach to identifying, analysing and managing risks, driven in part by dissatisfaction with traditional reactive policing and a policy landscape of value for money (Maguire 2000). However, in operational policing the volume of apparent risk is high and it can be difficult for officers to identify those situations which require intervention (Heaton, Bryant & Tong 2018). This means that 'retrospective judgements about the selection and adequacy of interventions are likely to be affected by the nature of the outcomes of events' (Heaton, Bryant & Tong 2018, p. 11). The police approach to 'risk business' (i.e. missing persons, child protection and domestic violence) has also been influenced by the desire to avoid public criticism in response to high-profile incidents (Heaton 2009).

We draw on data collected via ethnographic fieldwork in a police force control room (FCR) in England to highlight how officers and staff construct narratives of risk and how these narratives shape and guide organizational behaviour(s) and decision-making. We argue that in addition to bringing risk tools and artefacts 'into being' through their (inter-)actions, for staff, these technologies of control are a safety net to justify practices in a post-austerity policing landscape. These narratives of risk highlight the erosion of opportunities for officer discretion, particularly in relation to their responses to domestic incidents. Despite policy discussions of the need to reduce officers' risk aversion and reduce unnecessary bureaucracy (Flanagan 2008), risk aversion still permeates police culture. Moreover, a 'protectionist agenda' in policing means that uncertainty becomes a justification for pre-emptive action by

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officers and staff before risks become known (Heaton, Bryant & Tong, 2018). This reflects a shift in policing to precautionary approaches which do not necessarily follow the intended blueprints of risk management (Ransley & Mazerolle 2009). Therefore, inaction is seen as indefensible, even when the potential threat or consequence to victims or members of the public is unknown (Campbell 2004). We focus on risks most present for staff working in a FCR and officers on response. Domestic abuse incidents were our primary focus and were a central feature of the work we observed, though other risks, particularly around vulnerability soon became apparent. We acknowledge these risks may be different in other FCRs dependent on their organizational service failures and the 'cautionary tales' which influence officer and staff decision-making.

The structure of the article is as follows: First, we outline the current context for policing in England and Wales and the function of the police force control room (FCR). We then review literature on risk in policing and criminal justice and the precautionary principle. We present the theoretical and analytical framework which draws on Foucault's 'governmentality thesis' and his concept *le dispositif*. This allows us to analyse the police response to victims of crime (particularly for critical incidents) and the turn to what we have called '*precautionary policing*'. After providing an overview of the methods utilised, we present findings which focus on: 1. organizational 'technologies' of risk, which both guided and surfaced staff actions and decisions; 2. riskwork to mitigate and manage risk to victims and the public; and 3. riskwork relating to the professional decision-making of staff.

### **Risk, austerity and the police force control room**

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The police FCR is an aspect of police occupational culture which has been relatively understudied by sociologists and criminologists, with the exception of the work of Manning (1988), Waddington (1993) and more recently Stafford (2016) and also work by conversation analysts. This is despite the role that call handlers and dispatch officers play in defining incidents, drawing boundaries concerning what constitutes police work, and what can/will be responded to by the police in a post-austerity context of increased demand, reduced resources, and the civilianisation of various traditional police roles (Lumsden & Black 2018). The FCR is a function performed mainly by staff. In England and Wales in 2009 13 forces had more than 90 per cent of their FCRs staffed by civilians, with a force average of 85 per cent (Boyd, Geoghegan & Gibbs 2011). Call handlers are the first line in the investigation process (HMIC 2017). They identify where evidence needs to be preserved, issues of vulnerability and safeguarding, and the priority level that calls needs to be ascribed. Given the increase in the number of calls and the decrease in resources, call handlers are not always given the appropriate guidance and are increasingly dealing with calls over the phone rather than sending a response officer. There are no national targets for police response times to emergency and non-emergency calls. However, of the 38 forces that have set a local target, over half are failing to meet that target (HMIC 2014a). This is against a backdrop of austerity cuts implemented to policing in England and Wales since 2008.

In 2017 HMIC raised a 'deep-red warning flag' after identifying practices of deliberately suppressing demand, not responding to crimes, and not making arrests due to a lack of resources. In his *Review of Policing*, Flanagan (2008, p. 7) raised concerns regarding the need to reduce officers' risk aversion and reduce unnecessary bureaucracy: 'this means that better understanding of risks to the public is matched by a better understanding of the dangers of

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risk aversion, within the service and in wider society.' The 2009 *Reducing Bureaucracy in Policing* report called for standards, policy and training to take a 'balanced view of risks' in order to reduce the blame culture which officers viewed as leading to risk averse policing (Heaton 2010). The College of Policing has created various operational policing guidance. For example, its Authorised Professional Practice (2013) guidelines contain 10 principles related to risk. These are designed to encourage the police service to adopt 'a more positive approach to risk by openly supporting decision makers and building their confidence in taking risks.' However, Heaton (2010) argues that the sheer volume of guidelines and difficulty implementing them in daily practice results in officers becoming more risk averse.

In the last decade there has been a shift in policing priorities 'from crime fighting to public protection of ever-widening scope' (Heaton, Bryant & Tong 2018, p. 2). Acting to prevent harm has become a central focus for police officers, who frequently deal with 'low-probability, high-impact risk' (p. 2). In the UK, a rising protection agenda with a focus on vulnerable adults and children coincided with a series of critical public enquiries, such as the Laming Report into the death of Victoria Climbié<sup>1</sup> and the Bichard Inquiry into the Soham child murders.<sup>2</sup> The result of this has been an increasing level of public intolerance for service failure, damage to police force reputations, and individual officers being held accountable for misconduct. The hindsight of inspections and audits means that negative outcomes are 'far more foreseeable after an event than they were beforehand' (p. 2). We see a shift in official discourses towards encouraging officers to be more confident in their decision-making. However, as we will demonstrate herein, this has not filtered through to frontline policing, and risk processes and officer discretion often conflict.

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## **Literature: risk, the precautionary principle and policing**

### ***Risk in policing and criminal justice***

The management of risk is a central component of criminal justice while protecting the public has become the dominant theme of penal policy (Garland 2001). Discussions of risk within criminology and criminal justice literature have primarily drawn on Beck's (1992) 'risk society' and Foucault's (1997) 'governmentality thesis'. The central tenant of the 'risk society' thesis is that governments in late modern society were shaped by an awareness of the risks that these times generated. These risks were to be managed by the collection and generation of expert knowledge that could predict and mitigate these risks but which paradoxically created new fears about new risks and highlighted the limitations of our expert knowledge.

From a Foucauldian governmentality perspective, risk takes on a less totalising and realist perspective and offers a social constructionist account of risk 'in process' and 'ever becoming' (O'Malley 1999). Risk is the means through which populations are regulated, disciplined and managed utilising actuarial techniques of information gathering and probable future prediction. State power operates through the segmenting and ordering of social life, classifying groups based on statistical knowledge of risk (Mythen & Walklate 2006). Within criminal justice and penal policy this probability is most clearly developed as a form of actuarial justice, theorised by Feeley and Simon (1992) as the 'new penology' in which the riskiness of offenders has overshadowed the search for moral culpability. Risk is no longer managed at the social level but rather at the individual level (Mythen & Walklate 2006).

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In *Policing the Risk Society*, Ericson and Haggerty (1997) link the social changes identified by Beck's 'risk society' and Foucault's 'governmentality thesis' to analyse the workings of institutional governance. They argue that police work is organized around risk management and the prioritising of future predictions in a society consumed by insecurity and fear. Police officers become risk professionals who generate forms of risk communications about security which they then share and exchange with risk professionals from external institutions. They become knowledge workers, satiating demand for knowledge about risks whilst bringing 'into being' those risks identified in the future. Ericson and Haggerty challenge previous understandings which viewed police work as driven by the police culture of discretion, action-focused, and non-reflexive, in which information gathering, risk communications and technologies (the 'paper burden') do not shape police operations but ultimately come to support an officer's retrospective accounts and actions (Manning 1988). They assert that police work has become organized by classifications of risk and by the technologies that gather risk knowledge. These technologies force specifically rigid collections of expert risk knowledge which allows for rapid assessment and response of resources in the 'perpetual quest for certainty' (Ericson & Haggerty 1997, p. 34).

Subsequent work on policing, security and risk makes reference to *Policing the Risk Society*. Mythen and Walklate (2006) explore the relevance of theories of risk to understandings of 'new terrorism'. Campbell (2004) analyses Ericson and Haggerty's idea of risk communications and the reduction in police narratives in decision-making. Ferret and Spenlehauer (2008) consider whether the thesis can be applied to risk management practices within Road Traffic Policing. The latter conclude that *Policing the Risk Society* may have produced an ideal type of risk governance, rather than an actually existing reality, something

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that Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish* in relation to the panoptic prisons of disciplinary power. As O'Malley (2015) states: 'In practice all manner of unforeseen conditions will come between the diagrams or blueprints of government and their realisation' (p. 429).

### ***The precautionary principle***

As the 'risk society' thesis developed during the 1990s and 2000s, certain events, for example the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, and the global recession of 2008, challenged our reliance on risk management tools and attempts at scientific predictions about the future. The 'precautionary principle', especially in matters of security, began to take precedence over discourses of knowable risk. 'Precautionary risk' urges us to take action on the basis of potential "unmanageable risks", even after tests have been conducted that find no evidence of harm' (Aradau & Van Munster 2007, p. 102). Therefore, to be responsible means engaging in prevention 'at all costs' and appreciating 'that the future cost of harm is immeasurable' (Ericson & Doyle 2004, p. 147).

The precautionary principle has its roots in the German *Vorsorgeprinzip*, which emerged in the 1970s and developed into a principle of German environmental law (Ewald 2002). In the realm of insurance, the precautionary dispositif 'inscribes upon the existing technologies of insurance other forms of calculation and relationality to the future' (Aradau & Van Munster 2007, p. 101). Precautionary risk is based on four interlinked rationalities that allow for the deployment of specific technologies of government. These include: 'zero risk, worst case scenario, shifting the burden of proof and serious and irreversible damage' (Aradau & Van Munster 2007, p. 103). However, the essence of the precautionary principle is that *any level of risk is unacceptable*, and because risk assessment will only take you so far, at some point

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you have to start thinking about 'worst case scenarios'. Policies based on uncertainty view knowledge as unreliable therefore moving away from evidence-based policy to '*worst case scenarios*' and '*what if?*' questions (Crawford 2004; Ransley & Mazerolle 2009). Uncertainty becomes a justification for pre-emptive action before risks even become known.

Within policing, the academic literature on the precautionary principle has mostly been considered in relation to security and terrorism (Walker 2008; Lennon 2016) and to the management of dangerous offenders (Hebenton & Seddon 2009). The use of 'suspicionless searches' under Counter Terrorism legislation, allowing for people to be stopped and searched before any risk has materialised, is an example of precautionary policing at the street level (Lennon 2016). It is characteristic of what Walker (2008) terms 'all-risks policing' in which intelligence-driven approaches no longer offer the confidence to discern 'foe from friend' under the threat of terrorism. Within 'all risks policing' everyone can be an object of risk or riskiness, not necessarily because of the individual, but because of 'the nature of the threat and the vulnerability or importance of a particular target' (p. 277). It is important here to also note the distinction between the terms prevention and precaution within policing. As Ewald (2002) makes clear, prevention has roots firmly in risk discourse, wherein knowledge over risks is assumed and developed. In contrast, the precautionary logic applies to those potential consequences which are inherently uncertain and unknowable.

### **Foucault: *le dispositif***

We draw on Foucault's governmentality approach to the study of risk and his concept *le dispositif* (Foucault 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2008). It forms a crucial constituent of societal analysis in Foucault's work which is 'on par with the more familiar analytics of discourse,

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discipline, power/knowledge, subjectivity, and subjectification' (Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer & Thaning 2016, p. 274). Dispositif is able to cut across and connect categories 'such as institutions, classes, and cultures together with ideas, ideologies, and beliefs' (Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer & Thaning 2016, p. 273). The term is useful here as it carries with it the connotations of 'something that disposes or inclines', or 'has the quality of disposing or inclining' (Oxford English Dictionary (OED), s.v., cited Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer & Thaning 2016, p. 275).

As Salter (2008) clarifies: 'Foucault's sense of dispositif is not mechanistic as a structure, an apparatus, or a network per se, but rather a constellation of institutions, practices, and beliefs that create the conditions of possibility within a particular field. It is a capability for governance, or the disposition of a field towards a mode of governance' (p. 248). Examples of dispositif which Foucault discusses include legal, disciplinary and the security dispositif. The various elements that make up a dispositif can be understood as rationalities and technologies of government (Aradau & Van Munster 2007). Dispositifs are contained within rationalization processes and in historically situated systems of thought and strategies (Aggeri 2017). Dispositif is of a relational nature (Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer & Thaning 2016). It allows us to take account of external influences on an organization (and vice-versa), and the relationship between the individual and the organization (Välikangas & Seeck 2011). Dispositif is also a valuable analytical tool in that it permits us to account for the unintended consequences arising from a dispositif.

Foucault's dispositif has been applied in international relations and governmentality, insurance and finance, science and technology studies, discourse theory and analysis, and

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studies of management and organizations (Agamben 2009, Aradau and Van Munster 2007, Deleuze 1992, Collier 2009, Jäger 2001). However, it has not yet been utilised to analyse policing. Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer and Thaning (2016) develop Foucault's dispositional analytics as an overarching analytical framework for organization studies. Huber and Scheytt (2013) focus on the expansion of risk management after the 2008 global recession and why it continued despite its failure to manage risks during the crisis. They argue that a dispositif of risk management, 'an assemblage of institutions, regulations and models, lies at the heart of risk management' (p. 88). Aggeri (2017) outlines the value of dispositif and governmentality for the study of performativity in organizations. He demonstrates how various management tools and instruments 'in action build practices and even impose their own logic on those who make use of them...' (2017, p. 39). Aradau and Van Munster (2007) employ the concept of dispositif to explore precautionary risk and risk analysis as conceptual tools that shed light on the practices defined under the 'war on terror'. Here, risk is a dispositif for governing social problems and 'creates a specific relation to the future, which requires the monitoring of the future, the attempt to calculate what the future can offer and the necessity to control and minimize its potentially harmful effects' (p. 98). This links everyday risks like crime, and catastrophic and extraordinary risks, like terror.

Therefore, a Foucauldian approach and le dispositif permit us to focus on 'how' everyday risks are governed in policing, rather than whether they are calculable or incalculable. It also operationalizes risk as a mode of regulation, through which populations are surveyed (Mythen & Walklate 2006) and enables us to understand precautionary risk as a dispositif that attempts to govern what appears to be ungovernable. When 'technologies of knowledge reach their limit, precautionary risk relies on decision as a technology for governing

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uncertainty' (Aradau & Van Munster 2007, p. 107). We can see this reliance on decision as a technology for governing uncertainty in policing, and we will explore this further below. Thus the dispositif as an analytical tool allows us to consider how in the governance of risk or security there is the disposition towards particular 'forces, resources, and norms' (Salter 2008, p. 262).

One of these norms is the form of 'riskwork' that staff and officers engage in. According to Power (2016) 'riskwork' is the work which goes in to risk management and the 'actions and routines through which organizational actors make sense of risk, of themselves and their roles, and collectively try to enact institutional scripts' (2016, p.8). Risk is thus an organizational practice (Power 2016). At an institutional level, risks are uncertainties which have been identified as objects of management (Power 2007). Once an uncertain event becomes a risk, it is placed within a system of expectation, attributing responsibility and opening it up to an audit processes. However, just because a risk is placed within the management process it does not directly follow that the risk can be managed, only that organisations must 'act as if the management of risk is possible' (Power 2007, p. 6). This organizational processing also includes consideration of the individual actors who engage in the everyday managing of risks, which is a key focus of this paper.

## **Methods**

The discussion draws on findings from an ethnographic study of a police force control room in England. The study was more broadly concerned with the police response to domestic violence calls at the frontline, which included call handling, dispatch and response officers (see Lumsden & Black 2018). Domestic abuse calls were the initial primary focus of the

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observation, particularly regarding definitions, resourcing, and management of risk. However, during the observations other frequent calls and practices were observed which were of significance to the general functioning of the control room. As Hughes states, the purpose of ethnography is to obtain a rounded rather than a segmented understanding of the field (cited in Boyle 1994). 66 hours of observation were conducted between November 2016 and February 2017. This involved a combination of day (7) and early evening shifts (6). Author 2 conducted 11 hours of observation while Author 1 conducted the majority of the observations totalling 55 hours. Ethnography allows for detailed investigation of human behaviour and the factors that influence such behaviour. We participated in the setting by listening to the calls and observing call handler and dispatch behaviours. As part of this study we also conducted four focus groups with frontline officers (26 officers in total) in order to explore their response to domestic violence calls, and the relationship and interactions between dispatchers in the FCR and frontline officers on response; however, we do not draw on this data herein.

Access to the FCR was granted via the manager who acted as gatekeeper and made decisions as to which individuals or teams we would sit with. The authors acknowledge that the decisions of the gatekeeper as to who would be observed may have been shaped by the overt nature of the research and the potential reactions of the staff (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). We were placed with staff who were most willing and open to observation and discussion and this could demonstrate the gatekeeper managing the research field. We were given a head-set in order to listen to the call handlers and the dispatchers' conversations with response officers and other parties. There were no great differences in terms of the gender composition of FCR workers, however during some shifts it was observed that there were more female call

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handlers on the non-emergency and emergency call function. The majority of call handlers and dispatchers we sat with were civilian staff, although police officers were also present in the roles of supervisors, intelligence officers, and demand management teams (i.e. resolving crimes via telephone calls rather than face-to-face visits). The civilian staff identified themselves as the frontline and exhibited many of the cultural practices of rank and file officers. They wore uniforms, worked shift patterns, and engaged with members of the public and police officers in a variety of emotionally demanding situations. Several of the staff were special constables while others were applying to become police officers or had been so in the past. In this sense, there was not a clear division between staff and officers. The below excerpt describes the spatial organization of the FCR:

The FCR spreads across two main rooms, with smaller offices coming off them. The two rooms house the call handlers and the dispatch room which are separated by a few steps up and a door. The dispatch room is up the stairs. In the dispatch room there are three main banks of desks with a raised platform containing two additional desks looking over the room. These two desks seat the 'Oscars', the inspectors who have responsibility of the room. The two outermost banks of desks cover the five divisional policing areas ... with either one or two dispatchers per geography. If there are two, one person tends to be the lead and the other acts as a support; writing up logs of action, making calls, looking up intelligence etc. It also includes one dispatcher dedicated to roads policing and one dedicated intelligence officer. The middle bank of desks included the shift leader for the dispatch and other staff/officers who have a more victim-centred job; making calls, keeping people informed, looking up information. (Field notes, 18 November 2016)

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Short-hand notes of observations and conversations with staff were made in the FCR, either in a notebook or in a mobile phone notes function. This helped to highlight items that we did not want to forget without being intrusive. Field notes were then written up after each observation and described the setting, calls, conversations and incidents. We adopted an inductive approach to analysis and entered into a simultaneous process of deduction and induction, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for thematic analysis. Theory was developed out of data analysis, and subsequent data collection was guided by the emergent theory. The study received ethical clearance from the university and followed the ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association (2002). Pseudonyms are used to disguise the identities of police officers, staff and callers. The police force and geographical areas have also been anonymised and any identifying factors omitted from field notes so that they do not result in the identification of the force or employees.

## **Findings: a dispositif of risk in policing**

### ***1. Organizational technologies of risk***

There were several risk management tools and technologies that officers and staff in the FCR interacted with throughout the shift. One of the most significant tools which call handlers and officers use to inform decision-making when taking a call is the THRIVE methodology (threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerable and engagement). The 'threat', 'harm' and 'risk' approach is a way of 'allocating policing resources in a way that maximises police productivity and performance by focusing on the right things' while also helping to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy and approve accountability (Flanagan 2008, p. 10). Many forces in England and Wales now adopt the Threat, Harm, Risk Matrix, or 'THRIVE model' to inform

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their operational decision making. This formal risk management framework is used by call handlers in FCRs to assess the appropriate police response to emergency and non-emergency calls. The incident is then graded as: non-attendance (often resolved over the telephone - Grade 4), a scheduled appointment (SA) (a defined meeting time in the following days - Grade 3), a priority (non-emergency: to attend as soon as available - Grade 2), or immediate response (emergency incident - Grade 1) and passed to a dispatcher who identifies and deploys the most appropriate and timely resource, and relays background information to the response officers. THRIVE sits within the National Decision Making Model (NDM) which guides decision-making by all actors within the police (College of Policing 2014).

It is through risk tools such as THRIVE that officers act as the 'risk experts' identified by Ericson and Haggerty (1997). Call handlers seek information and store this as 'communications' which shape how and when they respond, based on the risks identified via THRIVE. These risk tools operate as 'risk artefacts' which are tangible representations of risk (Power 2016). They are a product of expertise and knowledge used to guide decision-making in close proximity to decision-makers. They can also often be used to audit performance 'at a distance' from decision-makers. However, in the FCR we observed, pre-emptive and precautionary policies had been put in place which subverted the risk management process, challenging officers' status as risk experts. One example of this is their domestic abuse policy which required call takers to grade *all* calls that were domestic related incidents as either an immediate response (grade 1) or a priority (grade 2). This domestic abuse policy supplanted the immediate need for call handlers to make decisions based on THRIVE. Staff in the FCR saw this as a precautionary policy to protect victims, but also to protect the force:

I asked Matt how domestic violence incidents were graded. He informed me that all DA's [domestic abuse incidents] were graded as either an emergency or as a prompt. A prompt means that an officer will be out as soon as possible, but it is not their immediate priority. The implication being that as soon as there are no emergency graded incidents, the officer will attend. It should be at some point within that shift. In reality, these prompts often keep getting pushed back as emergencies take priority. I was informed that often these DA incidents do not require a grade 1 or 2 (emergency and prompt) and that an equivalent incident that was not DA related would usually be given a 3 or 4 (Scheduled visit or no attendance - usually dealt with over the phone). I asked why they were automatically graded 1 and 2 and ... he said it was, '*in the interest of the victim, but also ourselves*'. The notion of possible litigation hovered over the description he gave. (Field notes, 18 November 2016)

As can be seen in the above excerpt, the domestic abuse policy operates at a level beyond the THRIVE risk assessment and at times in opposition to THRIVE. Incidents which would in other contexts be responded to as a scheduled appointment or not resourced at all were automatically resourced when domestic-related, negating the need for expert risk decisions at this level. This represents a shift from managing probabilistic outcomes based on THRIVE to possibilistic 'worst case scenario' outcomes. The reason for such specific policy action is related to the history of policing domestic abuse and the significant managerial and auditing processes that monitor responses to domestic abuse at a local and also a national level. Previous studies have highlighted rigid frontline police processes which create a culture of risk aversion and disproportionate precautionary responses from officers to victims of

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domestic abuse (Robinson et al. 2016). What we see here is that this precautionary response is established at the call handler level, further shaping the police officer's response to the victim.

What begins to emerge is a prevailing view that responding to these incidents is often at times unnecessary, goes against staff and officers' own professional judgement, and also drains dispatch staff as they attempt to resource a high volume of domestic-related incidents with frontline resources that are already under strain:

A call had come in to the 999<sup>3</sup> call taker of a parent who was reporting that their child had stolen their electronic tablet. This story was being told to me by the dispatchers as it was an incident in their queue. As the call was being made the call taker had overheard arguments in the background. So because it was an argument it was dealt with as a domestic rather than a theft. This caused some eye rolling ... They went on to say that most calls come in from neighbours as they overhear arguing and report a domestic. The suggestion was that this was over the top and unnecessary ... As the dispatcher was updating the logs on the tablet theft I asked what was happening. She said that the tablet had been returned but that in the furore the father had been pushed so there was a disclosure of physical assault. But because the tablet had been returned the father didn't want to take it any further. But because it had been classed as a domestic it was on the system as a grade 2. The dispatchers comment about this was that the IP [Injured party] was not going to cooperate, but because it was in the system the police would need to attend, they would have to keep calling and sending letters. She described a long list of things they would have to spend time doing as though it

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was a drain on the resources. She said it would go on for about 3 weeks trying to pursue this domestic and that nothing would come from it. She seemed very annoyed by this. She was somewhat exasperated by the idea that they would have to chase this up for the next few weeks even though she already knew what the outcome would be. (Field notes, 24 November 2016)

Dispatch officers found it frustrating that domestic incidents would appear in the resourcing queue for longer than 'non-domestic' grade 2 incidents. As noted above, one main reason for this was that they were often judged as lower risk than other grade 2 incidents (i.e. grade 3 or 4) and so would be de-prioritised and pushed down the queue as other incidents came in. This effectively created a separate sub-set of grade 2 incidents which were treated within a slightly different timeframe but nonetheless resourced partly due to fear of inaction (Heaton, Bryant & Tong 2018).

Another reason for this frustration was that victims did not always want to engage with officers, but officers had to attend as per the domestic abuse policy:

I asked about the domestic jobs. One had been in the queue since the 2nd December (it was now the 6th) and two had been there since the 4th. One had come in that day. Andy said that the four that had been waiting were cases of the victim not wanting to engage with the police. He went down the list saying things like, '*She* (pointing to an incident) *doesn't want to see us so that's going to be difficult, and that* (pointing to another one) *is going to be a nightmare*'. He went through the notes showing me the actions that had been taken. Calls had been made to the IP but she didn't want to

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speak. The police had been to the house of two of the IPs but they didn't answer. One of the IPs had no fixed address and so they struggled to find her. They managed to speak with her on the phone and she said she would come to the station at a specific time but did not then attend ... He lamented the fact that they were sat in the queue unable to be resolved. (Field notes, 6 December 2016)

Here, we see the 'riskwork' that goes into managing domestic-related incidents which sit outside of the formal risk management process. The relationship that emerges between individual staff and the risk management tool highlights the impact of wider organizational requirements within a precautionary dispositif. The unintended outcome of the dispositif on those staff members is more management of risk, rather than less.

The domestic abuse policy intends to 'design out' any chance of risk rather than allowing risk assessments to be made or, 'the willingness to make decisions in conditions of uncertainty', as per the College of Policing's principles of risk. Response officers are expected to attend incidents, decisions which may sometimes be at odds with the victims' wishes, and which can cause frustration at the dispatch level and the response officer level. It also brings 'into being' other forms of risk knowledge. Response officers who attend domestic incidents are expected to complete a domestic abuse risk assessment using a DASH (Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment) form which comprises a series of risk questions. This risk assessment has been designed with the intention of improving officer interactions with domestic abuse victims and identifying the signs of potential future risk (Robinson et al. 2016). However, the usefulness of this tool as a 'risk artefact' (Power 2016) is challenged when officers do not value the need for it:

As we were talking a grade 1 domestic came in. A female was reporting her ex-partner banging on her door. As Andy was trying to get someone who could respond (all of the officers were engaged) the incident was downgraded to a prompt as the ex had left as the IP was on the phone. The IP believed he was still sat outside in a van. However, the IP was a repeat caller and the ex had priors for violence so officers were still deployed. This is what the police reported back: When they got there the ex was sat in his car. They went to speak with the IP but she wouldn't speak to the police. The police asked the ex what he was doing and he replied that he came to collect his child every day at this time but on this occasion the IP called the police ... The officers radioed up and said '*nothing has happened. What are we supposed to do?*' The officer asked Andy to call them (point to point which is a direct call to their radio so other people can't hear on the airwave). Andy relayed to me what had been said. He stated that the officers were asking what they needed to do now. They were saying it was a non-crime, nothing had happened so what should they do if the IP won't speak to them. Andy stated that they would probably still need to do a DASH and a safety plan but that he would check with the Oscar. He asked the Oscar what they should do and she said they needed to go back and get a DASH. Andy radioed the officer in the case and told them they needed to get a DASH. He said to them, '*I appreciate it's not the best*'. He was referring to the having to follow up on this when the officers didn't seem to want to. The officers agreed but were slightly reluctant. (Field notes, 6 December 2016)

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Officers are engaging with the risk management tools but do not fully accept them as expert artefacts. They engage with these risk tools producing risk knowledge, which works against their own discretion. For example:

A call came in of a bailiff who had attended a house to reclaim a debt and the home owner (who was not there) had called to say he was coming to kill the bailiff. Andy contacted the officers to ask if they were free. They said they were on the phone with the IP mentioned above filling out a DASH form. They said it in a way that was trying to make a point like, '*no, we are still here doing this DASH!*' So Andy said again about domestics taking up necessary resources. He said, '*so that (the DA) just screwed us for this*' (the bailiff). They were unhappy that the few resources available were being tied up with domestics. (Field notes, 6 December 2016)

The above example is demonstrative of what we have termed '*precautionary policing*' within the dispositive of risk. Here we see the relational nature of organizational policy, external austerity impacts and localised staff beliefs and norms shaping the way in which these everyday risks are governed. The policy, which intends to improve officer responses to domestic abuse and the culture that surrounds it, serves to undermine its intentions through a 'one-size-fits all' approach. The rigidity of the policy reduces officer and staff decision-making which reinforces their awareness and practices of risk-aversion. It also confronts an austerity environment wherein it increases the number of incidents that need to be resourced, which has a further impact on the demand management and time of frontline response officers. Therefore, these forms of risk assessment are devalued if officers see them as working against their own discretion, rather than complementing it.

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## ***2. Everyday riskwork with victims and the public***

Above, we have demonstrated how the domestic abuse policy is a form of precautionary policing driven by uncertainty and the prospect of a potential bad outcome or 'worst case scenario'. We identified similar forms of precautionary policing, especially with regards to vulnerable people or critical incidents that have occurred in the past. A critical incident is defined as: 'any incident where the effectiveness of the police response is likely to have a significant impact on the confidence of the victim, their family and/or the community' (NPIA 2011, p. 10). Calls that related to vulnerable victims or previous critical incidents had a permeable presence within the FCR. The precautions that followed these incidents were ways of reducing the possibility of uncertain outcomes for victims. It is the inability to know which incidents may lead to negative outcomes for victims which drives precaution:

As we were talking a call came in from a husband who was reporting his wife was missing with their child. He said she was vulnerable and he believed she was in the company of a man who was seen as dangerous. There were previous reports connected to this female so it was treated as more seriously that it would have otherwise. Sarah said they needed to go and see this woman to make sure she was ok. It was on the system as a prompt [grade 2] ... Sarah said that they would not inform the partner of her whereabouts but that they needed to find her and see her anyway. Eventually the Sarah made telephone contact with the female. Sarah asked if she was safe and well and assured her that she would not inform her ex of her location. The female confirmed she had left him and that she was staying with a friend. She told Sarah where she would be for officers to go and speak with her. She also confirmed

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that she was in a new relationship with the other male mentioned ... I asked what would happen next and she said they would try to send an officer round to the house. She said this would be a welfare check as there are no crimes. I asked why they needed to physically see her. Sarah mimed a gun to the head and said we always need to see people in case they are being threatened on the other end of the phone. '*We don't know if they have a gun to the head*', she said. She stressed that they need to be physically seen by an officer to ensure safety. (Field notes, 1 December 2016)

This speaks to Salters' (2008) understandings of risk in the security industry which suggests that imagination is 'the primary act of risk' (p. 248). Imagination constructs 'what' is a risk in a world where anything can be a risk. Risk management processes are created to tame this imagination and make it rational and reasonable. However, within a precautionary (policing) risk disposition officers move away from reliance on having knowledge to shape decisions, to acting under a constant banner of uncertainty (Aradau & Van Munster 2007). As noted above, a precautionary rationality plans according to 'worst case scenarios'. Although unlikely, there is always a possibility that callers and victims 'have a gun to the head'. It is this 'imagined' possibility which shapes the call handler's response.

Another example of this 'unlikely but possible' scenario relates to a precautionary policy of managing '*dropped 999 calls*': when a call is placed to 999 but the caller cannot be identified. Often these calls are the result of accidental dialling or children playing on the telephone line. All of the dropped 999 calls are classified as a grade 1 emergency and it is the responsibility of the FCR supervisor to make contact with the caller to ensure their safety. There is the possibility that the caller may have come to harm or is under duress, as has

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happened in the past. The resulting policy is a precautionary approach which carries with it a worst case scenario tension:

...a dropped 999 call came in to the station with shouting in the back ground. As per policy, this needed to be resolved. The Oscar took the lead. They conducted a subscriber check and there was some confusion between t.mobile and O2 as to who owned the phone. Neither could agree if it was their phone.... Next the call records of this number were pulled and the last 10 calls were analysed. The Oscar began calling the last known numbers and found a person that said they knew the phone holder... The police attended this person's house and got told that the number belonged to a person in the top flat. The police went to the top flat and stated that the residents were not cooperative... The officers had left the flat when they provided this update. On advice of the Oscar, Jill [dispatcher] asked the officers to go back to the flat and push a little harder... A little later the Oscar provided another name that might be connected to the phone... The officers were on their way to the street as I left at 10.00pm. This had been going on for approx. 4 hours with no obvious signs of ending. (Field notes, 1 December 2016)

The practice of physically *seeing* a caller or victim was a precautionary response to potentially risky calls; risks in terms of harm to victims but also critical incidents (harms to public and police). Staff in the FCR would talk of needing to '*lay eyes*' on potential victims or '*look at them*':

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There was a DA incident occurring on the desk next to ours. I didn't get the details but the Oscar [supervisor] had come over to speak to the dispatchers. They were trying to locate the IP and those involved seemed to be a little frustrated at resolving this job. The Oscar stated: '*We just need to look at them*'. (Field notes, 8 December 2016)

The tensions generated around risky calls were alleviated through the act of physically seeing the victims/callers. It provided reassurance to the FCR and frontline responders that the victim was safe at that particular point in time. Within a more risk-averse context it also demonstrated externally that the officers had attended the incident. The longer it took to respond to a risky call, the more tensions were generated:

There had been a DA incident that had been reported at 8.00am that day [now approx. 5.00pm] which still needed resourcing. The IP worked at a school and had stated that she didn't want the police attending her home but would rather they come to her work. The Oscar seemed annoyed that they had not yet been able to see the IP and expressed annoyance at the IP's account of the incident and also her requirements ... The IP, according to the Oscar, had said she would be free that day (but they hadn't got to her) or they could come to her work tomorrow and she would '*try to see them*'. ... He repeated that she '*might*' be free. His concern was making sure they saw the IP. He said: '*This is a domestic. We need to see her at the end of the day*'. (Field notes, 1 December 2016)

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In the above examples there is a tension between the lack of available resources, the victim's wishes, and the precautionary need to physically 'see' the victim as soon as possible to confirm that they are safe. The Oscar (supervisor) is involved as they are the only people authorised to schedule an appointment for a domestic related incident (i.e. downgrading it from a 2 to a 3). This is an example of what Heaton (2010) calls 'scaled up' (i.e. adding additional layers of management to the risk management process). Again we see riskwork engaged in to manage the pressure that emerges during this incident. The history of policing domestic incidents and the domestic response policy that has been implemented because of this history adds to the anxiety surrounding these risks. As Fischer and McGivern (2016) argue, new forms of risk management implemented after a crisis can heighten people's affective response. We see here the attempts to minimise the unknown and incalculable effects of the future as a way of governing social problems within a risk dispositif (Aradau & Van Munster 2007).

### ***3. Professional decision-making and risk***

In addition to policies which manage risk to victims, staff also manage risk to the organization and themselves. The emerging *precautionary risk dispositif* imposes its own logic on those who engage with it within the FCR. Staff engage in particular forms of riskwork in order to manage or rationalise their professional decision-making in relation to the risk management policies, tools and technologies they interact with. These individual actors make sense of institutional scripts (Power 2016) via certain practices that reinforce the presence of risk within the FCR. Risks that the police are currently focusing on become risks through the ways in which they become 'thinkable' and through the ways in which staff attempt to manage them (Aradau & Van Munster 2017). One such way in the FCR is through

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the use of '*cautionary tales*'. Officers and staff would describe a selection of critical incidents that either they or nearby forces had dealt with. These incidents had often resulted in investigations and/or forces being held to account for service failures. They acted as folk tales or urban legends within the FCR, being told and retold by staff who most likely had not had any involvement with the original incident. However, they also acted as cautionary scripts and reminders when similar incidents were called in, for example domestic abuse calls or dropped 999 calls. The researcher was told on several occasions about a select few incidents that had specific relevance to frontline responses, especially call handling and dispatch. Smith, Pedersen and Burnett (2014) note that police forces are storytelling organizations. Police use storytelling to make sense of situations and to establish culture. They also perpetuate the 'social and political dimensions of police knowledge' in that 'stories pass on and replicate the organizational DNA' (p. 232). In the FCR stories were used to foreground risk and to demonstrate an awareness of the need to be cautious. They ensured the continued and imagined presence of previous critical incidents, the lessons from which guided staff behaviours and actions within a risk-averse climate. These stories affected the individual working practices of FCR staff.

Officers and staff also hinted at a 'blame culture' (Heaton 2010) within policing, in contrast to the national policy objective of improving confidence with regards to risk-taking:

I asked the dispatchers about their views on the DA policy of grading all DA's a 1 or 2 Their view was that it is better to be cautious and have to downgrade at a later date than miss something at the initial call. They raised the notion of potential risk. They said that everyone will have an incident investigated at some point. They said that at

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any one time someone will be under investigation but that people don't tend to tell each other when it happens. They looked around the room as if to suggest that someone in there would be under investigation at that time. People don't say to each other it is happening but it will be happening. So they discussed the need to be very careful with how you respond to an incident. They said you need to keep logs of the decisions you have made so that at any time you can go back and justify the decisions you have made. The logs support your account and can serve to back up your decisions at a later date if needs be. So they were favourable of being risk aware. They mentioned that there is always the chance that on that one occasion that you don't keep an account something bad might happen. This notion of the 'one' bad outcome hangs over the dispatchers and contributes to their response. (Field notes, 22 November 2016)

As can be seen above, the fear of investigation for service failures individualises staff in an otherwise team-working environment. It also adds to a culture of fear within the FCR of not knowing where and in what situations people are being held accountable for their actions. One way in which staff manage this unknown is through the detailed and cautious keeping of logs which account for their decision-making. This was referred to as '*arse covering*' and operated as a defence mechanism against the tensions of a risk aversion occupational culture:

The intelligence officer talked about '*rationalising*' all decisions made... All decisions needed to be recorded, including why you would or would not respond to an incident in a particular way. She called it '*arse covering*'. She described the need to keep records of everything in case something happened and you need to account for

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your decisions. She said '*if you don't write it down, it hasn't happened*'. Even if you have acted, if it isn't written down it hasn't happened. She said that if something happens to a victim '*all they want to know is, who was the last person to deal with it?*' The '*they*' in this scenario being some form of police investigators. The implication being that if you are the last point of contact in a case then the responsibility falls to you. (Field notes, 24 November 2016)

### **Discussion and conclusion: precautionary policing**

This article has highlighted how risks are governed within a precautionary (policing) risk dispositif. In this FCR, staff and officers maintained a risk averse approach in contradistinction to policy efforts and discourses which support a balanced approach to risk taking. In practice, the risk artefacts that have been designed using knowledge and expertise are contradicted by rigid policies and practices that are implemented to avoid any risk. This zero tolerance for risk also highlights the issue of resources being 'diverted into unattainable attempts to eliminate the possibility of "high-profile" failures' (Heaton, Bryant & Tong 2018, p. 2; see also Heaton 2010). Thus we begin to see a shift in policing to precautionary approaches which do not necessarily follow the intended blueprints of risk management. Ransley and Mazerolle (2009) identify this uncertainty as the 'hallmark of the new era of policing' (p. 368), ushered in because of challenges to legitimacy from a wider audience and an expanded police remit including new security and social policy responsibilities. In the context of uncertainty, inaction is indefensible, even when the potential threat or consequence is unknown (Campbell 2004). However, this precautionary approach is continually (re)negotiated in relation to an austerity environment in which resourcing incidents is a challenge.

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The policies and responses discussed above are demonstrative of this fear of inaction. In contrast to this, officers and staff ensure they engage in *action*, including prioritising *physically seeing* victims and callers in relation to specific offence types. This, as we have seen, often threatened and eroded opportunities for police discretion. As Heaton, Bryant and Tong (2018) observe, while scientific techniques of risk management are important for informing decision-making, the 'fast and frugal' forms of risk assessment required by officers and staff are still crucial to informing police practices (p. 6). Therefore, inflexible policies intended to design out risk may actually serve to hinder context-specific risk assessment. Tools like the domestic abuse risk assessment (DASH) have been implemented to improve the police response to victims of domestic abuse; something which has historically not been seen as 'police work'. However, the graded response policy may work against these intended benefits in a precautionary dispositive. A study by Ballucci et al. (2017) highlighted that domestic abuse risk assessment tools were seen as either an alternative or a challenge to police discretion and expertise, rather than as the collection of expert police knowledge (cf. Ericson & Haggerty 1997). This article highlighted the tensions that arose for officers utilising risk assessments that are implemented to assist officers' decision-making and which can result in resistance rather than incorporation. As Fischer and McGivern (2016) argue, risk management tools which are designed to 'cool problems' may instead 'heat up' feelings of fear and blame within the risk management setting.

In *Policing the Risk Society* Ericson and Haggerty (1997) discuss a move away from excessive paper work and narrative accounts of policing to risk tools, technologies and proforma which require limited information in the move to efficient risk management

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knowledge gathering. Campbell (2004), however, suggests that in contrast to Ericson and Haggerty's 'end of narrative' account, police officers engage in keeping narrative accounts of their actions, justifying their practices, and the decisions they make. This contradicts the notion of the 'police as risk experts' and, as Campbell demonstrates, highlights the actuality of risk management. Keeping narrative accounts as an additional and individual practice is representative of the 'struggle to expertise in neoliberal societies' (Campbell 2004, p. 710). As we can see in the examples above, keeping logs and narratives of decision-making is a form of precautionary policing and a defence mechanism in which staff are anticipating potential future problems and uncertainties. Here, narrative acts as a form of precaution against unintended consequences. However, rather than providing feelings of security, these narratives drive and maintain the presence of risk aversion; sharing cautionary tales and preparing to be held accountable at some unknown but potential future point. At an individual level, the riskwork engaged in in a precautionary risk dispositif carries an affective dimension generated in the interaction between risk tools and technologies and those who interact with them.

In this article we have provided the first application of Foucault's *le dispositif* to understand and conceptualise the riskwork that is performed within policing, specifically focusing on the police force control room and response. We conceptualise '*precautionary policing*' as a *dispositif* which attempts to govern what appears to be ungovernable. By conceptualising the police response to crime through a precautionary *dispositif*, we can unravel the relational influence between national and local policy and discourses, risk tools, artefacts and technologies, external public and political pressures, and the practice of individual subjects at this historically situated moment (Foucault 1980). It allows us to understand the actualities of

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how risk is being managed and the additional work that goes in to this as opposed to the assumed rational and cool logic of risk management practices. Moreover, we can begin to understand the relationship between individuals and the police organization through the everyday practices that they engage in within the requirement to effectively manage resources in line with risk whilst being complicit with policies that do not allow for it. This generates affective tensions and concerns and goes some way to explaining the difficulty in reducing the culture of risk aversion that continues to permeate the policing environment and the resistance this engenders. Further empirical studies of police cultures and police organizational practices including international comparisons and case studies using this analytical tool would assist us to broaden out the relational categories that influence and dispose the police organization and its subjects to precautionary policing.

Further studies would also be useful to allow us to discern how different forces' risk practices are shaped by differing critical incidents and cautionary tales that have guided their local risk policies. Whilst it is likely that there will be similarities, for example with domestic abuse, there may also be force specific incidents that have resulted in force specific risk management practices which have created other forms of affective response. It should be noted that some of the resistance we saw in this study to domestic abuse incidents are likely to be informed by existing police culture that may place less value on responding to these incidents. Further work in this area is needed to ascertain how policies in relation to responding to reports of domestic abuse received by the organization, may work against one another as they are viewed by particular actors or groups as threatening or resisting traditional tenets of police culture. Reviews of domestic abuse risk assessment tools have already shown that whilst they can be hugely beneficial for victims, they can also misalign

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with the realities of frontline policing which in practice are emotional, time-bound and pressurised (Robinson et al. 2016). In addition to a precautionary policing and 'one-size fits all' policies, this pressure appears to be greatly increased, particularly in the current post-austerity policing landscape.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A young child who was killed by her guardians. This incident led to major reform in child protective services.

<sup>2</sup> The murder of two school girls by a school staff member which led to the introduction of detailed criminal records checks for all persons working with children.

<sup>3</sup> 999 is the telephone number for contacting the emergency services (police, fire service and ambulance) in England. The non-emergency telephone number for the police is 101.