3PO Summary Report

Overview of initial findings

Foreword

Policing is in the front line of protecting the public against harms. When dealing with often challenging and fast-moving circumstances, it is perhaps only to be expected that police forces, as organisations, may receive some criticism from the public or media. But, increasingly, with the growing scale and reach of social media, we are seeing individual police officers and staff being singled out. Such instances can move very quickly from 'legitimate concerns' to online harassment and abuse, impacting on the individuals and families. Moreover, the amount of personal information now stored and shared online can lead to police personnel being identified and targeted for a number of anti-social or criminal reasons.

In the first year of 3PO we have come a long way to better understand the extent and nature of challenges police officers and staff face online, both in their professional roles and away from the job, i.e., 'as citizens'. We have also started to map out experiences of family members, i.e., the partners and children of officers and staff working in the police.

I am excited about the impressive progress we have made in just over a year, and it is a pleasure to share our insights in this report.

This would not have been possible without the incredible support and commitment from our partner police forces and Home Office: my sincere thanks to our partner forces, and especially also the SPOCs in each force for their dedication and ongoing support. I am also extremely grateful to all police officers, police staff and family members who have given us their time for the interviews and focus groups on which the findings in this report are based.

Going forward, we will focus on developing concrete opportunities to support police forces, police personnel and their families in preventing and managing online harms – and we have ambitious plans for us as consortium in the coming months to make this happen. Some examples you can find in this report.

I hope you find this overview of 3PO interesting and inspiring, and I look forward continuing on this journey together.

Prof. Saskia Bayerl
Head of Research at CENTRIC
Principle Investigator 3PO

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Executive Summary

3PO (Protecting Public-Facing Professionals and their Dependents Online) is a UKRI funded project which aims to uncover the unique risks facing policing professionals and their dependents online. Over the past year, project members from five partner universities, along with the six partner police forces and Home Office, have focused on delivering empirical data and products against key project objectives. This report provides a summary of key activities and findings throughout the first year of the project.

Result Highlights

1. Literature and documentation reviews confirm that there is a key gap in policies, guidance, support and training on online safety for policing professionals, particularly for protection outside work and their families.

2. Despite a general lack of guidance, police officers, staff and their dependants report to exercise caution when being online, often utilising increased privacy settings and anonymity. This includes various forms of decreased participation online.

3. Teenage children of policing professional all reported to be online regularly and often expressed less caution about potential online harms. Yet, they still described protective steps to ensure online privacy and safety due to their parents' profession.

4. Police training on online safety issues for the private sphere is generally lacking, with an over-reliance on 'common sense'. In consequence, participants asked for more and more targeted training and guidance, which should be delivered 'in-person' and refreshed regularly.

5. Three potential technological approach were identified as possible ways to support the prevention and mitigation of online harms to police officers, staff and their families offering self-assessment, harm reporting, and situational awareness options. Early prototypes of the tools are being piloted with police professionals and their families to provide crucial feedback to guide the next stages of development.
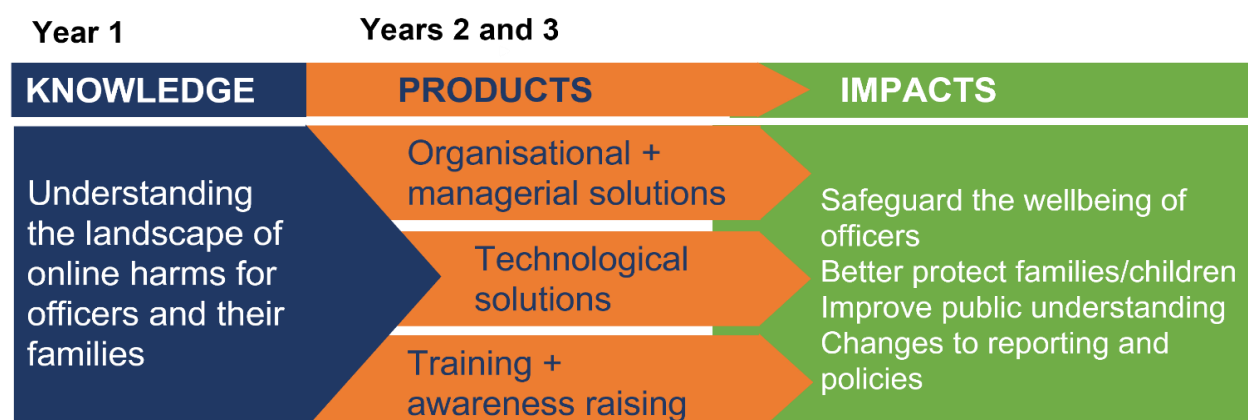
About the 3PO Project

3PO is a 3-year project funded under the UKRI Strategic Priorities Fund (EPSRC Grant Ref: EP/W032368/1). It is part of the [REPHRAIN](#) network, which is a Research Centre of Excellence focused on the protection of citizens online. 3PO focuses on the protecting from online harms of police professionals and their families.

3PO combines five renowned universities and related research centres (CENTRIC/Sheffield Hallam University, University College London, University of Oxford, University of Cambridge and Edinburgh Napier University/SIPR) with six police forces and Home Office as active partners.

Our ambition is to:

1. Create in-depth, inductively developed models about the nature, drivers, mechanisms and consequences of online risks and harms for police officers, police staff and their dependents that recognize the police-specific challenges of 'context collapse' between professional and private spheres.
2. Create technical and non-technical mechanisms to support the prevention, management and mitigation of online harms to empower police officers/staff and their dependents to participate fully in the digital economy and in online life.
3. Establish a community of practice between academia, government, industry and third sector organisations to support continuing knowledge exchange and actions to address challenges of police personnel beyond the end of 3PO.
4. Create resources for researchers and future research efforts to guide ongoing investigations into challenges of public facing professions beyond policing.
5. Create societal awareness for the challenges and threats of police personnel and their dependents as citizens online by increasing public understanding and sensitivity, as well as potential behavioural changes through awareness campaigns, broad result dissemination and engagement activities.

Project plan

Year 1	Years 2 and 3	
KNOWLEDGE	**PRODUCTS**	**IMPACTS**
Understanding the landscape of online harms for officers and their families	Organisational + managerial solutions Technological solutions Training + awareness raising	Safeguard the wellbeing of officers Better protect families/children Improve public understanding Changes to reporting and policies

Work Stream 1: Understanding Risks and Protection Needs

Dr Kate Whitfield, Dr Charlotte Coleman and Dr Adam Bates (CeBSAP, Sheffield Hallam University)

Dr Kris Christmann and Dr Ingolf Becker (University College London)
Dr Lasara Kariyawasam and Dr Katrin Mueller-Johnson (Oxford University)

Overview

Work Stream 1 focuses on understanding online risks for police personnel and their families, as well as how they protect themselves and their families. Interviews with police officers/staff, their partners and children were conducted to explore:

- What do their online experiences look like in practice and how are they influences by being linked to police?
- What strategies do police officers/staff, partners and children employ online to protect themselves?
- What do they do to avoid abuse and negative experiences?
- How do police officers/staff feel about the support they receive from their police force, and how do their partners respond?

- What could be done to better support officers and family members to improve their experience and safety in the future?

This work stream further conducts a review of policing policies regarding online safety and compares them with institutional guidance in other areas to assess the type of policies and support structures are presently available to prevent or manage online harms.

Summary of Initial Findings

Police Officers/Staff and Partners
1. Social media use: Participants use a large array of online services, with social media (Facebook, Instagram) mentioned the most frequently. At the same time, high

awareness that police should be more careful than others in the online space.

2. *Online identity protection is common using* various techniques to keep identities obscured are employed such as fake names or random pictures. Further, there is a preference for a passive role on social media, acting as observers rather than active commentators.

3. *Negative online experiences lead to* a heightened awareness and stronger concerns about online settings and behaviours. Younger participants tended to be more aware of the positive impact of social media and exhibited higher levels of trust in it.

4. **Current policies and support** were not widely known and support was felt to be inconsistent and dependent on individual line managers.

Specialist Officers

1. *Social media use* tends to be highly limited together with a range of protective risk mitigation measures such as fake or avoidance of pictures.

2. *Partner and family social media use was* more active than the specialist officer, but also practiced protective behaviours in recognition of their partner's role.

3. *Experience of online harms* fell into two types: *unwanted identification* and *threats*. Personal experiences were limited but known from colleagues.

4. *Support and training tended* to be done by the specialist officer and/or the family themselves. Participants also reported delaying the introduction of their children to social media and monitoring of their child's social media use.

Teenagers

1. *Social media use* is high, mostly on platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram.

2. *Experience of negative online experiences* referred mostly to negative online content about police brutality/ hate. None of the participants had direct negative experiences because of their parent's police role.

3. *Safety online:* Most participants had taken some precautionary steps to stay safe online, e.g., strict privacy setting or not posting pictures of their parent in uniform.

Next Steps

The above is an initial overview of findings, and interviews are currently being analysed in more detail.

Based on the interview input, 3PO will conduct an online survey to capture experiences of police officers/staff and their families nation-wide for a more systematic picture of online challenges and harms.

Work Stream 2:
Co-developing Technological Solutions

Professor Saskia Bayerl, Professor Babak Akhgar, Dr Marcel Obst and Martin Snowden QPM (CENTRIC, Sheffield Hallam University)

Overview

This work stream focuses on developing technical interventions to support the prevention, management and mitigation of online harms affecting police officers/staff and their families. The technical solutions proposed include reactive harm reporting and mitigation tools, as well as proactive monitoring and risk self-assessments.

Three tools are being considered. The first is a *vulnerability scanner* to analyse an individual's online presence with tips for staying safe. The second is a *reporting tool for incidents of online harms* involving officers/staff and/or their families. The third is a *situational awareness tool* to locate potential threats against officers or to gather open-source intelligence on specific incidents.

Demonstration Sessions

To understand the functionalities for each tool, we conduct so-called 'demonstration sessions', which act as a platform for delving into the various technological possibilities and usage scenarios for each tool to best support police personnel and their families. The sessions are interactive and form the essence of the co-creation process that seeks to develop tools that integrate the day-to-day experiences of working within the police by coming up with solutions that police officers and staff have actively helped shaping.

General observations

All participants agreed that technology solutions are useful, especially for prevention in the form of self-assessment. However, they must be accompanied by processes in police forces as well as targeted training.

Outline of proposed solutions

Self-assessment tool
To analyse an individual's online presence, with tips for staying safe.

Harm reporting tool
To report incidents of online harm involving officers or their families.

Situational awareness tool
To locate potential threats against officers or to gather open-source intelligence on specific incidents.

Core features
Providing a report about the publicly accessible information about a person, showing tips on how to stay safe: for example, through changing privacy settings or deactivating tagging on pictures or geolocation.

Core features
Reporting online harm incidents with the option to add evidence, providing personalised advice/guidance, panic button for emergency situations.

Core features
Proactive scanning to monitor social media for mentions of the force or officers, reactive scanning to gather OSINT on incidents, red teaming to help individuals prevent confidential/private information from leaking.

Intended Users
Police officers/staff, partners and children.

Intended Users
Police officers/staff, partners and children.

Intended Users
Organisation/force.

Next Steps

Continuous feedback from police forces and families continuous to guide the development of the three technological tools. Along the way, police officers/staff and their families will be able to test prototypes and mature version to ensure that we build solutions that are practical and useful.

Work Stream 4:
Creation of Harm Protection Mechanisms

Dr Charlotte Coleman and Dr Adam Bates (CeBSAP, Sheffield Hallam University)

Dr Shane Horgan and Dr Yen Nee Wong (Edinburgh Napier University)

Overview

Work stream 4 aims to create protection mechanisms and managerial guidance for police organisations to better support police officers/staff and their families. This is achieved through document reviews which identify the current landscape of organisational protection strategies, policies, tools and practices, as well as interviews with senior police leadership and HR functions.

Summary of Initial Findings

While all organisations have social media policies, most focus online security advise within the professional role (e.g., passwords, secure networks or general conduct). In contrast, specific guidance and policy relating to personal and/or family social media use are very rare. Similarly, training resources specific to online harms were hard to identify. Moreover, there seems to be a mismatch between policies and guidance believed to be available (even by officers themselves) and what has been discovered when searching for these documents.

This indicates a need for new evidenced-based guidance on how to approach the personal use of social media and what to do if abuse is experienced by off-duty staff or their families.

Next Steps

The next step are interviews with police managers and HR personnel to explore current practices and how to support organisational mechanisms for protecting police officers/staff and their dependants as citizens online.

Work/ Stream 5:
Training and Awareness Raising

Professor Barak Ariel and Brandon Langley (University of Cambridge)

Overview

The previous work streams made it clear that there is a demand for training materials and resources to better equip police officers and their dependents in the online sphere. Work stream 5 builds on this work to developing targeted training materials.

Summary of Initial Findings

Police Officers/Staff

Most officers/staff reported to have received little or no training about online safety in their personal life and how to achieve wider protection for family members. Also, most participants could *not* easily answer what to do when presented with negative online situations.

Online behaviour tended to be self-taught and shared informally. Generally, participants felt that training updates should be mandatory. Also, participants expressed a preference for face-to-face trainings.

Specialist Officers

Most of the interviewees recalled some online safety training role, although provisions were mainly about security messaging and tended to be generic.

While specialist officers showed high levels of awareness of online risks, there was an overall recognition that more training at both force and national level to protect policing professionals and their dependents from online harms is needed – again with a preference for face-to-face training with regular refresher courses.

Next Steps

Work stream 5 will move forward by focusing efforts on the creation of training materials for police officers and their dependents based on previous work findings, subject matter expert inputs, and previous training programmes.

The team are designing recruitment campaigns across three distinct streams, employing strategies ranging from personal invitations to internal communication channels.

Given the nationwide scope of this project, the production of these materials is challenging. Despite this, we are optimistic for the possibility of implementing this essential module with high fidelity, as well as the prospect of evaluating its efficacy through experimental outcomes.

Interested Getting Involved in 3PO?

We'd love to hear from you!

There are a number of ways in which you can help the project in our research:

- Project members are still looking for *teenagers* of police officers/staff to take part in their interviews. Scan the QR code to find out more:

- If you are interested in participating in any of the other parts of the project (technology or training development), please get in touch with the team at 3po@shu.ac.uk

- Sign up to our quarterly newsletter for more regular updates on the activities in the 3PO Project:

- Connect with us on social media: