



**Protecting police officers,  
police staff and their  
families from online harms**

## **Introduction to the 3PO Toolkit**

**Supporting Individuals & Forces**

# 3PO Introduction

**3PO (Protecting Public-Facing Professionals and their Dependants Online)**<sup>1</sup> was a three-year (2022-2025) research project investigating the unique challenges and risks facing police officers, police staff and their families online. Whilst considerable research about online harms is being conducted on groups such as journalists and elected officials, the awareness of police officers and staff as potential victims remains limited. 3PO aimed to increase awareness of and knowledge about this challenge, exploring the extent and nature of online harms faced by officers and staff in their policing roles but also in their private lives, as well as the impact of online harms on themselves, their families and police forces. It used these foundations to develop approaches and solutions to improve prevention, mitigation and support.

3PO pursued three overarching goals which shaped the resources found in this Toolkit. Operationally, the project aimed to develop **force-ready tools and guidance** that help officers, staff, families, managers and police forces to reduce exposure to online risks and respond effectively when harms occur. At an organisational level, the project worked to equip policing forces with **evidence-based recommendations and strategies** that improve internal readiness, safeguarding practices, and policy development. Finally, the project also aimed to **increase awareness** of the challenges facing policing professionals in digital environments and highlight the need for broader support.

The 3PO project was led by CENTRIC (Centre of Excellence in Terrorism, Resilience, Intelligence and Organised Crime Research) and brought together five universities, six UK police forces, and the UK Home Office.

## Project Trajectory



<sup>1</sup> 3PO received funding by UKRI (UK Research & Innovation) as part of its Strategic Priority Funding; grant reference EP/W032368/1.

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# Definition of Online Harms

What is meant by online harms? It is a broad concept that is used to refer to the negative impacts of behaviours encountered online.

In the 2019 Online Harms White Paper<sup>2</sup>, consultation<sup>3</sup> and subsequent Online Safety Act<sup>4</sup>, HM Government sought to develop a definition covering the wide range of possible harms in the online sphere, conceptualising it as *'user-generated content or behaviour that is illegal or could cause significant physical or psychological harm to a person'*.

**Online harms, therefore, are the result of others' online behaviours, which can be illegal or legal but still harmful.** The Act's definition was enhanced further by outlining areas of harm, including terrorism, child sexual exploitation and hate speech.

While useful, in the context of online harms affecting police personnel and their families, 3PO felt it necessary to identify the specific online harms that police officers, staff and families experience.

**3PO research identified two distinct areas of online harms**, each with the potential to have a significant impact:

- Direct harms
- Indirect harms

<sup>2</sup>2019 Online Harms White Paper

<sup>3</sup>2020 Online Harms White Paper: Full Government Response to the Consultation. Technical Report. Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Home Office.

<sup>4</sup>2023 UK Online Safety Act

# + TYPES OF ONLINE HARMS

## 01. DIRECT HARMS (i.e., attacks by others with direct harm intentions) such as:

- Trial by social media
- Abuse
- Harassment/trolling
- Unwanted identification and malicious doxing (the online posting of full name and address)
- Direct threats online to police officers, staff and/or families

Such activity could be instigated online from the outset or develop online after initial physical-world contact with a perpetrator, individual or group. Similarly, online activity could transcend into the physical world, with direct threats and risks.

## 02. INDIRECT HARMS such as perceived need for self-restriction or exposure to negative content without direct harm intentions, e.g.:

- Ongoing exposure to negative comments/pictures related to police or working in police (without personal targeting but with harmful impact)
- Worries about personal exposure/privacy/attacks that affect wellbeing
- Self-censorship in using certain platforms or free expression online
- Restrictions due to job-related regulations that affect opportunities to participate online for police officers, staff and/or family members

**Further examples of Online Harms are provided in the Common Types of Online Harms section of this Toolkit.**

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# The 3PO Toolkit

Building on the learning from the 3PO project, which is based on personal experiences of officers, staff, and families, alongside insights from forces and national policing bodies, **the 3PO Toolkit provides resources to improve the protection of individuals, families and forces** against the threats, risks and impacts of online harms.

Moreover, the 3PO Toolkit will enable national policing to improve mitigation against such harms and support their officers, staff and families if they do become victims.

The 3PO Toolkit has three pillars:

- **Awareness and understanding**
- **Prevention**
- **Mitigation and support**

In each pillar, the Toolkit provides resources for police officers/staff, families, managers or organisations, respectively. Each Toolkit element is further explained, enabling individuals and organisations to decide how best to use them as part of a comprehensive programme to improve protections and responses to online harms.

All of the 3PO Toolkit elements and resources are underpinned by **Policy Recommendations** to forces and national policing bodies that help inform and shape improvements (including regulatory efforts), in the protection against online harms.

## Access to the 3PO Toolkit

This document is part of the 3PO Toolkit.

For the remaining elements of the 3PO Toolkit, please visit:

**<https://centric-research.co.uk/projects/3po/toolkit>**



# TOOLKIT ELEMENTS

## 01. AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING

- A **register of common online harms** collated throughout the project, providing a reference point for understanding disparate types of common online harms (**Note:** This is non-exhaustive)
- An **assessment instrument** (survey and analysis framework) is available on request to enable forces to capture localised insights into the extent and nature of risks, harms, and impacts affecting their members and families
- **Awareness campaign materials** for police forces, to maximise support for staff and families

## 02. PREVENTION

- A **training package** for officers, staff and managers to enhance online harms prevention and mitigation measures (on request)
- **Guidance material** assisting individuals and families to better protect themselves online
- A **Self Assessment Tool** assisting individual officers, staff and families to improve their understanding of privacy and security settings on chosen social media platforms (e.g., X, TikTok, Facebook) and guide them to their preferred privacy settings (on request)

## 03. MITIGATION AND SUPPORT

- **Organisational and managerial guidance** on online harm prevention, mitigation considerations and support options
- A **Harm Reporting Framework** enabling forces to provide more effective and consistent collection, assessment, investigation and management of online incidents/concerns

## 04. POLICY

- **Policy recommendations** for UK and international contexts

# Project Details



The 3PO project was supported by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (Grant Ref: EP/W032368/1). It ran from April 2022 to March 2025 and was led by CENTRIC.

## THE 3PO CONSORTIUM



# Contact

If you have questions about this document, the 3PO Toolkit, or the project generally, please contact us at [centric@shu.ac.uk](mailto:centric@shu.ac.uk).

For more information on the project background or to access additional digital resources, please visit [3po-project.co.uk](http://3po-project.co.uk).



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