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The policing zeitgeist of 'threat', 'harm' and 'risk' in England and Wales: a systematic review to untangle their definition and operationalisation

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ABSTRACT

The language of threat, harm and risk (T/H/R) holds a central position within contemporary policing discourse. However, its meaning and practical application remain ambiguous and inconsistently understood. This qualitative review sought to clarify these ambiguities by conducting a systematic search across four policing-specific resources and academic databases, identifying 24 articles and reports, supplemented by data obtained through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to all 43 police forces, of which 33 responses were included. Definitions were explored using content analysis and a thematic synthesis approach informed by Braun and Clarke (2021), identifying five shared yet distinct definitional components for each term: *Intent and Motivation, Target, Temporal Dimension, Severity and Magnitude* and *Form and Modality*. The operationalisation of these concepts was further analysed through a structured deductive mixed-method content analysis, focusing on five key areas: *Identification, Identifier, Assessment, Action* and *Lack of Standardisation*. Based on these findings, a set of working definitions for T/H/R has been proposed to support conceptual clarity and consistency in policing practice. The review concludes by discussing the implications for operational practices, policy and future research, as well as the limitations of the current study.

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Introduction

What counts as a threat, a harm or a risk – and who gets to write the rules? Few words in policing carry as much weight – or as much ambiguity – as threat, harm and risk (T/H/R). Policing thrives on the promise of managing the future: anticipating threats, reducing risks and preventing harms. Yet, when risk itself is contested, when harm is elusive and when competing threat narratives shape decisions, the question is not only how these terms are defined but also what their definitions enable or obscure in the distribution of policing resources.

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This conceptual uncertainty mirrors a wider societal and scholarly preoccupation with risk, which has intensified markedly over the past three decades (Beck, 1992). As societies have become increasingly oriented towards the anticipation and management of potential harms, risk has evolved into a pervasive analytical lens, often framed more negatively than danger, hazard or even death (Li et al., 2020). Policing, reflecting these wider societal concerns, has adopted 'risk' as a central organising principle, embedding specialised vocabulary – risk-aversion, risk identification, assessment and management, to name a few – into operational practices (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997).

In this context, the policing prioritisation '[…] mantra of 'threat, harm and risk' […]', which gained institutional prominence around 2010 (Bacon et al., 2025, p. 1082), can be understood as policing's translation of broader societal concerns into actionable frameworks. Initially introduced by Sir Ronnie Flanagan's *Review of Policing* (2008) and subsequently endorsed by the Home Office Green Paper (2008), T/H/R shifted performance frameworks away from numerical targets towards strategic resource allocation based on perceived T/H/R. Written during an era of fiscal constraint and rising demand, the review framed threat as pressures on policing, harm as the consequences of unmet demand and risk as residual exposure once resources were deployed. Following its publication, official guidance emphasised aligning workforce deployment not only to visible demand but also to the '[…] less-visible demands of dealing with risk, threat and harm to the public' (Home Office, 2009, section 5.7). Consequently, T/H/R became embedded in subsequent frameworks, most notably in the THRIVE (Threat, Harm, Risk, Investigation, Vulnerability, Engagement) risk assessments, guiding officers' decision-making and placing these concepts at the centre of operational deployment, prioritisation and assessment (Halford & Webster, 2024).

Despite their centrality in modern-day policing, the concepts of T/H/R remain conceptually unsettled. For instance, the College of Policing – the independent professional body responsible for setting policing standards – promotes tools such as THRIVE and the National Decision Model (NDM) but provides no singular, authoritative definition of the steps requiring evaluation of T/H/R (College of Policing, 2021, 2024a). Similarly, neither the Home Office nor the Ministry of Justice offers clear or unified definitions. Even reformative programmes, such as Operation Soteria Bluestone, which sought to expose systemic weaknesses in rape and serious sex offence investigations (NPCC, n.d.), lean heavily on the language of T/H/R without defining it in operational terms. For example, 'risk' is invoked interchangeably to denote victim vulnerability, suspect behaviour and investigative demand, with no clarification of whether it refers to likelihood, impact or workload, with similar ambiguities apply to harm (Stanko, 2023). While acknowledging that the Soteria report is practice-oriented rather than a theoretical treatise, its conceptual ambiguity exemplifies how even cutting-edge reform operates with categories that are ubiquitously cited yet rarely interrogated. Part of this conceptual ambiguity stems from the multiple, often conflicting interpretations of risk: it can signify the likelihood of harm (HM Prison & Probation Service, 2023), probability of reoffending (Craik et al., 2024), a combination of both (gov.uk, 2024), risk of vulnerability (College of Policing, 2021) predictive forecasting of crimes before they happen (Ferguson, 2016) or even organisational risk (Surrey & Sussex Police, 2024). Comparable ambiguity also surrounds the concepts of threat and harm. Yet, while one might perceive T/H/R as descriptive tools to give weight to categorical matters (e.g. encompassing potential reputational or operational consequences), these concepts bend to fit different contexts. Policing is multi-dimensional, and T/H/R definitions shift across diverse policing domains (e.g. public protection versus neighbourhood policing), professional roles (e.g. call handlers, frontline officers or detectives) and situational pressure (e.g. from slow-moving investigations to rapid on-the-spot decisions). Indeed, the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) notes that a call handler's assessment of T/H/R may differ from the priorities of a first responder on scene (IOPC, 2022), reflecting a profession that navigates complexity and practitioner discretion.

These shifting definitions matter not only for academic debate but for operational practice, as they shape how resources are distributed and priorities justified. This systematic review interrogates that ambiguity. However, it does not attempt to produce a universal definition of T/H/R. Rather, by synthesising how these concepts are defined and operationalised in policing research, policy and practice, it maps the conceptual landscape, highlights recurring patterns and gaps as well as providing a defensible foundation for a working definition of T/H/R in policing. This systematic review forms the first stage of a broader, ongoing project, beginning with a critical examination of this definitional ambiguity and offering both scholars and practitioners a clearer understanding of how T/H/R function in practice. Accordingly, the review asks: How have T/H/R been defined, conceptualised and operationalised across policing, and what common elements can be identified to inform a working definition for policing?

Method

This study used a qualitative systematic review to synthesise how T/H/R are defined, conceptualised and operationalised across academic and policing research, policy and practice. Content analysis and a thematic synthesis approach, informed by Braun and Clarke (2021), were applied to capture definitions and conceptualisations, while a structured deductive content analysis examined practical operationalisations. The data collection proceeded along two parallel strands: (1) a systematic literature review, conducted using the databases and search terms specified below and (2) FOI requests submitted to 43 police forces, with ethical approval for the latter granted by Bournemouth University's ethics committee (Reference 62164). The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Page et al., 2021).

Eligibility criteria, information source and search strategy

The search for T/H/R definition and operationalisation in policing was conducted between December 2024 and June 2025. As outlined in Table 1, using Boolean Operators, six

Table 1. Utilised search strings and keywords.

Keywords and search terms
Risk AND defin* AND Policing
Risk AND operation* AND Policing
Threat AND defin* AND Policing
Threat AND operation* AND Policing
Harm AND defin* AND Policing
Harm AND operation* AND Policing

independent searches were conducted across three police resources, namely the (1) Home Office, (2) College of Policing and (3) Ministry of Justice and through three academic databases; (4) EBSCO Database, (5) Science Direct and (6) Scopus. Furthermore, (7) Google Scholar was searched within an incognito window due to the algorithm personalising the display of articles.

To be considered for inclusion in this study, publications had to be available as a full text, written in English and published after 1995. The cut-off point was set in the mid-1990s when risk-based approaches in policing began to gain prominence, allowing the review to capture development over the past 30 years. For the academic literature, the review focused on publications that had undergone peer review. Doctoral theses and academic books were also included where relevant, as they typically undergo substantial scholarly scrutiny (e.g. examination by expert panels or editorial review processes) and often provide detailed conceptual and theoretical contributions not captured in journal articles. Publications such as editorials, notes, comments, letters or case reports were excluded. Geographically, the review was limited to studies conducted in England and Wales to maintain contextual specificity. In terms of focus, studies were required to define one or more of the terms ‘threat’, ‘harm’ or ‘risk’ in direct relation to operationalisation – that is, how definition(s) of these term(s) influence day-to-day policing practices.

As part of the review, 43 police forces across England and Wales were contacted through the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act to request any documents related to their operationalisation and definition of T/H/R. Within the United Kingdom, the FOI Act (2000) grants the public the right to access recorded information held by public authorities such as the police. Whilst the use of FOI requests has been proven as an effective methodology to gather specific, contemporary data in previous studies, an FOI request is often time-consuming for public services, meaning requests may be rejected (Savage & Hyde, 2014). As outlined by the College of Policing (2024b), the FOI Act (2000) provides public authorities with exemptions that allow them not to proceed with a request. For example, section 12 of the FOI Act (2000) sets out the appropriate limit, namely a cost threshold of £450 – or 18-h work. Other grounds for refusal included the requirement for requests to be proportionate (s. 14 of the FOI Act, 2000), meaning that vexatious or repeated requests may be declined.

Selection and data collection

Literature screening

(1) Academic literature

An initial Google Scholar yielded 109,600 results, from which the first 200 per search string were retained, following Haddaway et al. (2015). Combined with other academic databases, this produced 4751 records, imported into the citation management software EndNote. Initially, 2077 duplicates were removed, leading to 2674 records for screening. Of these 2674 unique articles, 2621 were excluded based on title, abstract and keywords, leaving 53 to review. Fourteen articles were classified as ‘maybe’ and subsequently re-assessed by the research team. Ultimately, 10 articles were included in the final selection. The full breakdown can be seen in the PRISMA flow diagram in Figure 1.

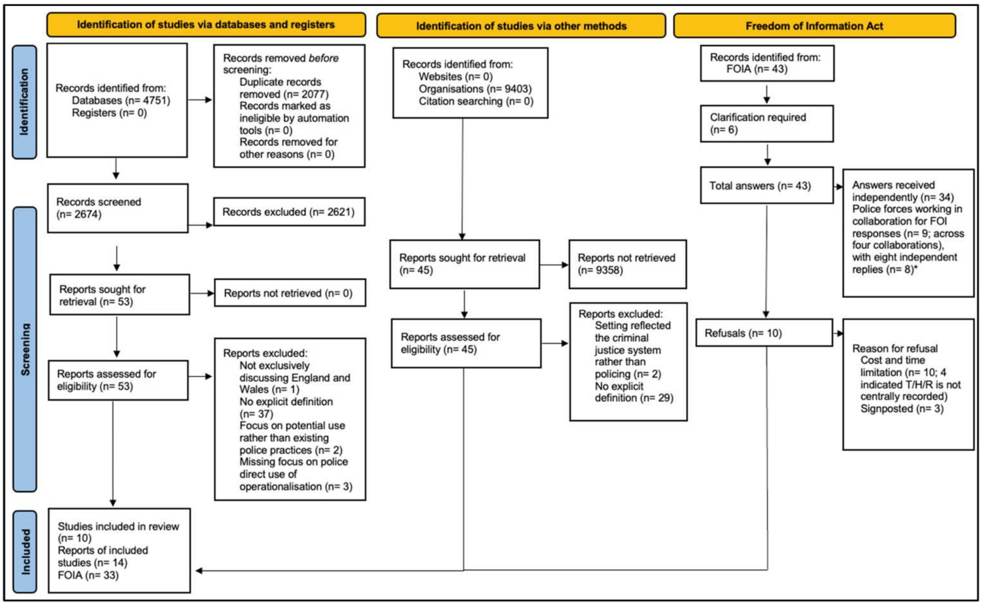

Figure 1. PRISMA study selection flowchart.

(2) Grey literature

The second search of grey literature identified 9403 records across the Home Office, the College of Policing and the Ministry of Justice. Given the breadth of results for 'Risk Factors', the review adopted an iterative approach, including only explicit definitions of the term 'risk', to distinguish definitional usage from implicit reference. Records were first screened by title, then by keyword scan (T/H/R) to identify potential definitions. A total of 45 articles across all organisational sources were shortlisted, read in full and assessed against inclusion criteria. Of these, 14 records met the inclusion criteria and were retained for analysis. All included records originated from the College of Policing, and MI5 met the criteria. As these sources took the form of websites that lacked download options, the content was manually extracted and saved as Word documents.

(3) FOI

As part of the FOI data collection, police forces contacts and their responses were systematically logged in Excel to ensure consistency. Following the initial request, six forces sought clarification, ranging from general queries to specific requests such as 'Can you please re-word your request and explain what you mean by threat, harm and risk?'. Many requested that the scope be narrowed to include only particular policing domains. Consequently, the decision was made to tailor the request to 'interpersonal offences', including, but not limited to, violent and sex offences. Forces which had not sought such clarification nonetheless provided a response confined to interpersonal offences. Although police forces are legally required to respond within 20 working days, only 26 forces replies were received within 30 days, necessitating follow-up with the remaining 17 forces, now with explicit reference to interpersonal offences. After a

6-month waiting period, responses were obtained from all forces ($n = 43$; 100%). To support consistency and anonymisation, responses were recorded in Excel and forces were assigned random numerical identifications.

Quality appraisal

The quality of academic literature was appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP; 2024) qualitative checklist, while the grey literature was assessed using the AACODS Checklist (Tyndall, 2010), which considers Authority, Accuracy, Coverage, Objectivity, Date and Significance. Each included publication was evaluated based on the standardised questions of the assessment tools, with responses rated as 'yes', 'no' or 'can't tell (?)'.

The majority of both the academic and grey literature records received a substantial number of affirmative responses ('yes'), indicating an acceptable level of methodological transparency and credibility. On this basis, the overall quality of the included studies was deemed satisfactory. However, it should also be noted that CASP was indicated in three studies of low quality, but this does not necessarily indicate that they were 'low quality'. Instead, these scores were a result of the studies use of (1) a mixed-methods design or (2) their nature as field summaries rather than independent empirical investigations. Whilst the included publications are sufficiently robust to support analysis, the following findings should be interpreted with an understanding that the evidence base does not represent the highest possible standard of quality.

Reflexive approach

Given the interpretative nature of qualitative synthesis, a reflexive approach was adopted throughout the review (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Suri, 2019). Reflexive practices included documenting initial assumptions, expectations and prior understanding of the topic before commencing the review, as well as keeping detailed reflexive notes during study selection, data extraction and synthesis. These notes captured moments of uncertainty, difficulties in interpreting qualitative findings and key decision points. The reflections were used to consider how the researcher's positioning might shape the interpretation of primary studies and the development of themes and to guide strategies to minimise bias, such as discussion between the researcher and revisiting coding decisions.

Synthesis methods

The data extraction and analysis followed a dual pathway. First, definitions of the three terms were examined to identify their core conceptual components. Second, the operationalisation of T/H/R was analysed. As some sources, particularly FOI responses, did not provide explicit definitions but embedded them within an operational perspective, these were categorised under 'conceptualised' in Table 2, reflecting how practical application reveals underlying understanding within a policing context.

Definition

To explore definitions of T/H/R, the academic and grey literature, as well as the FOI data, were analysed through content analysis and a thematic synthesis approach informed by

Table 2. Summary of extracted data from the included studies, reports and FOI.

Author	THR domain	Policing domain	Definition	Conceptualisation	Operationalisation
Christie (2020)	**Risk**	Operational Policing Practices	Risk is defined under the Health and Safety Act as 'the likelihood that a person may be harmed or suffered health effects if exposed to a hazard'.	Likelihood of **harm** or negative consequences arising from a particular action or situation, such as a police pursuit. **Risk** is inherently dynamic by nature, influencing psychological and situational factors that require ongoing assessment and decision-making.	The operationalisation requires real-time dynamic assessments of hazards, which are guided by the NDM. (Although the NDM was only used in retrospect to justify the risk-taking.) The risk evaluation is based on environmental factors, officers' experience, communication quality to the control room, along with motivational factors and behavioural dynamics which inform decision-making in terms of 'continue, alter or terminate' the pursuit.
College of Policing (2013)	**Risk**	Risk and Threat Management	**Risk** encompasses all kinds of uncertainty and insecurity, inherently linked with the potential of harm and decision-making, dynamic in nature.	**Risk** is the potential for uncertainty regarding an outcome, whether with positive or negative consequences. It is a dynamic, situational-dependent chance of harm or benefit, shaped by factors such as likelihood, impact and exposure to unknown variables. Furthermore, it is conceptualised as a professional responsibility of a police officer.	Risk, especially when full information or control is unavailable, must be managed through professional judgment, influenced by internal factors, such as personal discretion and organisational standards, as well as external influences, requiring a balanced approach to decision-making based on harm and resources. Risk decisions should be supported by tools and multi-agency collaboration, documented for accountability and foster a culture of learning to improve decision-making over time.
College of Policing (2022a)	**High Harm**	Crime Types and Vulnerable Population	**High harm** is defined as situations where a suspect has an interest in children and has the opportunity to offend against a child within the interested age range (e.g. boys aged 14–16), or the child is younger than 13, disabled, or endangered through suspects aggravated behaviour.	**Harm** is conceptualised as the severity of negative impact and consequences posed to children – particularly through explorative, abusive or sexually motivated behaviour by individuals. Harm increases through specific factors such as direct access to children or online targeting. Furthermore, Harm is influenced by children's age (e.g. under 13) and disabilities.	Harm is operationalised by assessing risk factors such as the age of children or disabilities and the suspects access to children. Multi-agency efforts and child abuse investigation units evaluate the severity of risk to safeguard children and manage suspects.

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Author	THR domain	Policing domain	Definition	Conceptualisation	Operationalisation
College of Policing (2022c)	**Risk**	Risk and Threat Management	**Risk** is defined as further victimisation, particularly if victims are vulnerable, as well as the likelihood of being targeted again.	**Risk** is conceptualised as a multi-faceted and evolving process that encompasses various factors (i.e. personal, social and situational) that affect an individual's vulnerability to harm.	Risk is operationalised by identifying factors through risk assessments, considering the victim's own assessment of their safety, while also addressing barriers like impairments that may hinder victims from seeking legal actions.
College of Policing (2023a)	**Harm**	Risk and Threat Management	**Harm** is defined as a fact-specific concept that encompasses a broad range of actions, including psychological or physical injury resulting from a single traumatic event or a series of less severe incidents, with its severity influenced by vulnerability.	**Harm** is conceptualised through legislation and court judgments rather than a fixed definition, but is generally understood as serious ill-treatment and abuse, encompassing both physical and psychological harm, which may be a single traumatic event or the cumulative effect of smaller incidents.	Significant Harm is the operationalisation of harm, determined by assessing the severity and impact of harm on individuals or groups. Decision-making plays a key role and is guided by PLANE and NDM guidelines to take ethical, legislative and proportionate reasoning.
College of Policing (2023b)	**Risk**	Operational Context in Policing	**Risk** is the impact and likelihood of preventing harm.	**Risk** is conceptualised as the recognition, assessment and management of potential threats and harm that could affect an investigation outcome.	The operationalisation involves recognising risks and their potential impacts, using risk assessment tools to determine the impact versus likelihood. To mitigate risk, appropriate decisions must be made, detailed records of those decisions kept and the risks and strategies communicated to others involved in the investigation. It is vital to consistently monitor and reassess risks to reduce the likelihood and impact of harm. Reference made to the 10 Risk Principles of the College of Policing.
College of Policing (2023c)	**Risk Factors**	Risk and Threat Management	**Risk** is defined within Risk Factors, which are divided into static (unchangeable) and dynamic (changeable) factors describing the likelihood for reoffending.	The conceptualisation of risk factors involves identifying and assessing dynamic and static risk factors to evaluate the potential harm an individual may pose.	Risk in public protection is conceptualised as a dynamic, multi-stage process involving identification, assessment and management, where structured tools like ARMS and MAPPA guide decisions, but professional judgment, continuous intelligence gathering and monitoring of both static and evolving (dynamic) risk factors remain essential for accurately evaluating and mitigating potential harm.

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Author	THR domain	Policing domain	Definition	Conceptualisation	Operationalisation
College of Policing (2023d)	**Risk**	Crime Types and Vulnerable Population	**Risk** is the potential for harm to individuals or the public, assessed based on likelihood and severity, with serious harm being life-threatening or traumatic.	**Risk** is conceptualised by evaluating the potential harm to the subject or public through considering the likelihood and severity of such harm and determining the appropriate response based on assessments.	Risk is operationalised through assessments and categorisations (e.g. low, minimal, likely, very likely, serious harm), which inform immediate actions and response planning and must be regularly reviewed and potentially adjusted.
College of Policing (2023e)	**Risk Factors**	Risk and Threat Management	**Risk** describes the dynamic nature of individual, situational or socio-cultural factors that increase the probability of suicidal behaviour/ indicating heightened vulnerability to suicide.	**Risk** within suicide is conceptualised as a collection of multi-dimensional factors that have a cumulative nature, reflecting the broader, systemic characteristics of risk.	The police operationalise risk by identifying signs of vulnerability, particularly during custody. Data-sharing systems like the Police National Computer and suicide surveillance groups support real-time identification and analysis of suicide rates. Collaboration with agencies, such as MASH, ensures a coordinated response. Police strategies include intelligence-led patrols, targeting suicide hotspots and proactive interventions, with trained negotiators or mental health professionals involved in high-risk situations.
College of Policing (2023f)	**Threat**	Operational Context in Policing	**Threat** is defined within the MI5 Guidelines.	**Threat** is conceptualised as an evolving condition by measuring its impact and safety for/to the public through expert analysis.	Threats are operationalised through the translation into threat levels, which guides the hierarchical influence decision-making for the planning of events and resource allocation, such as deployment options or utilisation of specialist personnel (e.g. CT SecCo or CTSA).
College of Policing (2024c)	**Threat & Harm**	Risk and Threat Management	**Threat** – defined in the context of threat assessments as the potential for harm, including the possibility of dangerous situations or actions. **Harm** – defined as the actual or potential damage resulting from threats, inflicted on people.	**Threat** – Conceptualised as a potential risk that could lead to harm through a combination of individuals capability and intent. It is assessed based on the likelihood and possible impact of that risk. **Harm** – Conceptualised as the actual or potential damage caused by the threat, which can affect individuals or groups. It is evaluated in terms of its extent and consequence.	**Threat** – Operationalised by gathering intelligence to utilise assessments to determine the likelihood and nature of the threat. Assessments are conducted in real-time and updated dynamically to determine threat levels, which enables officers to make informed decisions about the level of response. **Harm** – Operationalised in terms of risk management as the potential outcome of the threat, guiding the prioritisation of actions such as the use of force, tactical response or mitigation strategies.

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Author	THR domain	Policing domain	Definition	Conceptualisation	Operationalisation
College of Policing (2024d)	**(High) Harm**	Operational Context in Policing	**Harm** within 'Threat Assessments' is defined as physical or personal attacks, harassment, social media intimidation, disorder, criminal damage, protests, hate crimes, cybercrime, disruptions and interference with the election process.	The conceptualisation of **harm** encompasses various types of negative impacts that can affect individuals, property and the election process. Essentially, harm is conceptualised as any form of damage, threat or disturbance that could arise during the election and affect its participants, process or outcome.	The operationalisation of harm involves identifying, assessing and responding to potential threats through strategies such as threat assessments, resource deployment and intelligence gathering to prevent or manage incidents that could disrupt the election process.
Force 1		FOI	N/A	T/H/R is conceptualised through the THRIVE + model. A **threat** refers to the communicated or perceived intent to cause harm or loss to another person, property, reputation, public safety, community cohesion. **Harm** involves the actual or potential injury, damage loss or hurt to victims, caller or environment, while **risk** is the assessment of the possibility that something is occurring.	T/H/R operationalised through THRIVE+, PPN incorporating/including DASH.
Force 10		FOI	N/A	N/A	T/H/R operationalised through THRIVE and NDM.
Force 11		FOI	N/A	T/H/R conceptualised within THRIVE and NDM. **Threat** is a person or circumstance that is likely to cause injury or damage, whilst **harm** is the outcome or likely outcome, informing **risk**, which is the grading of severity and probability.	T/H/R operationalised through THRIVE, THRVA, RE-THRIVE, NDM, Domestic Abuse Practical Guide.
Force 12		FOI	N/A	N/A	T/H/R operationalised through THRIVE assessment matrix found on STORM, DASH, but exchanged against DARA in autumn 2025.
Force 13		FOI	N/A	N/A	T/H/R operationalised through the Summary Assessment Response model, DASH (exchange by autumn 2025 against DARA), FGM (female genital mutilation), MOSOVO, NDM, THRIVE.

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Author	THR domain	Policing domain	Definition	Conceptualisation	Operationalisation
Force 14		FOI	Unable to define it as T/H/R definitions are based on subjective evaluation of each officer.	N/A	T/H/R operationalised through THRIVE, NDM, Code of Ethics, JDM and PPN.
Force 15		FOI	N/A	Force-specific guidelines of THRIVE SE outline the sequential order of **threat** being assessed as an event towards victims, family and community, guiding the evaluation of **harm**, which is the caused or potential damage caused, including physical, emotional and/or financial damage, informing the **risk** evaluation, which is the likelihood of harm or threat occurring.	T/H/R are operationalised through the NDM and THRIVE SE.
Force 16		FOI	N/A	N/A	T/H/R operationalised through THRIVE.
Force 19		FOI	N/A	N/A	Provide training in relation to National Police Public Order Public Safety Training and the relevant Public Order Public Safety framework.
Force 2		FOI	N/A	T/H/R conceptualised through the THRIVE model as: A **threat** refers to the communicated or perceived intent to cause harm or loss, while **harm** involves the actual or potential infliction of physical, psychological, emotional or social damage. **Risk** is assessed based on the likelihood and seriousness of the event occurring.	T/H/R is operationalised through THRIVE.
Force 20		FOI	N/A	N/A	Provided a link with the search at College of Policing for 'threat risk harm'.
Force 21		FOI	**Threat** – Establishing what happened, could have happened and through whom. **Harm** – The actual or potential consequences. **Risk** – The likelihood of harm happening and the reasoning behind it.	T/H/R are conceptualised by the first point of contact within NDM and THRIVE, which determines the appropriate deployment, investigation and conclusion.	T/H/R are operationalised through THRIVE and the NDM.

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Author	THR domain	Policing domain	Definition	Conceptualisation	Operationalisation
Force 24		FOI	N/A – Partial Refusal	N/A	T/H/R operationalised through THRIVE; DASH; PPN, Vulnerability Assessment Framework assessment; Common Assessment Framework.
Force 26		FOI	N/A	N/A	T/H/R operationalised through questioning technique, THRIVE+S, DASH, which will be exchanged for DARA, THRIVE+, THRIVE, Risk Principles.
Force 27		FOI	N/A	N/A	Stated that T/H/R are concepts taught in all areas of Initial Police Education Training, wider learning and organisational development, NDM and THRIVE training, Code of Ethics, Equality Act 2010 training and Stop & Search. Specifically, the outlines were DASH and THRIVE.
Force 28		FOI	N/A	T/H/R is conceptualised through THRIVE. A **threat** is a communicated or perceived intent for an adverse outcome, a **harm** is to do or cause injury, damage, hurt (physical or psychological) and **risk** is the likelihood of an event occurring.	T/H/R operationalised in THRIVE and DARA.
Force 29		FOI	N/A	N/A	T/H/R operationalised in NDM, ICII Model, Awareness Speed Ability Proximity Model and Dynamic Risk Assessment, THRIVERS and THRIVE.
Force 3		FOI	N/A	T/H/R conceptualised and defined through the THRIVE model as: **threat** is the reported incident, **harm** is what happened, could have happened, also in consideration of no action or incorrect actions taken towards person, property, community and Force 3 reputation, whilst **risk** is the likelihood of harm occurring.	T/H/R operationalised via THRIVE and NDM.
Force 30		FOI	N/A	N/A	T/H/R operationalised through THRIVE, DASH risk assessment.

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Author	THR domain	Policing domain	Definition	Conceptualisation	Operationalisation
Force 32 + Force 25		FOI	N/A	N/A	T/H/R operationalised through THRIVE.
Force 33		FOI	N/A	T/H/R conceptualised through the THRIVE model. A **threat** needs to be accurately identified in order to consider what **harm** has or is likely to occur. Based on the impact of the threat and the likelihood of harm, a **risk** assessment is carried out.	T/H/R operationalised through THRIVE and its corresponding Question-sets.
Force 34		FOI	N/A	N/A	T/H/R are operationalised through the NDM, THRIVE, Policing approved Professional Practice for RISK and DASH.
Force 35		FOI	**N/A**	T/H/R conceptualised through the THRIVE model. **Threat** is a person or circumstance that is likely to cause damage or danger, whilst **harm** is the evaluation of the incident carried out and the subsequent consequences in the form of harm, damage and loss. **Risk** is the probabilistic accumulation of threat and harm being realised.	T/H/R operationalised through the THRIVE model and the NDM.
Force 36		FOI	N/A	N/A	States that T/H/R is integrated within the training for NDM and THRIVE models, covered in classroom programmes, practical assessment training, skill training and IT training.
Force 37		FOI	**Threat** – wide term with no literal meaning but understood as the source of danger, causing adverse outcomes and encompasses a summary of actual events, incidents or circumstances. **Harm** – relates to physical, emotional, financial and societal forms. **Risk** – synthesis of threat and harm which reflects the uncertainty and likelihood of future outcomes.	**T/H/R** is conceptualised as a sequential order within THRIVE.	T/H/R operationalised through THRIVE and RE-THRIVE.

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Author	THR domain	Policing domain	Definition	Conceptualisation	Operationalisation
Force 38		FOI	**Threat –** Anything that has the potential to cause harm. **Risk** – The likelihood that the harm will be caused. **Harm –** The impact on the person, community or organisation.	N/A	T/H/R operationalised through THRIVE and DASH.
Force 39			**Threat and Harm** – emotional, physical, psychological and social events, whereby vulnerability amplifies the seriousness. **Risk** – likelihood of threat and harm occurring.	Considering the NDM model, **threat** and **harm** are recognised as potentially emotional, psychological, physical or social. Whenever vulnerability comes into play, it determines the threat and harm level, which influences the urgency of response. **Risk**, on the other hand, is assessed by considering threat and harm and their seriousness as well as the likelihood of their occurrence.	T/H/R is operationalised through NDM, Risk Principles, Strategic Risk Management, 'Risk Management Framework in the Orange Book', THRIVE, THRIVE (-sp), PPN, Organised Crime Group Management, Right Care Right Person, MARAC, MAPPA, MATAC, DARA, KIRAT, ARMS, OSP, the OASys sexual reoffending predictor, RM2000 and DASH.
Force 4		FOI	N/A	Within the force-specific guidelines, THRIVE outlines **threat** as the identification of potential danger to people, organisational reputation, property, public safety or community cohesion – including what may occur if no action is taken. **Harm** considers the potential impact if the threat materialises and **risk** relates to the likelihood of such events occurring, but also informs the level of response required.	T/H/R are operationalised through THRIVE.
Force 40		FOI	N/A	T/H/R conceptualised through the THRIVE model: The identification of potential harm or danger to individuals constitutes the **threat**, which informs the **harm** level, which is the actual or potential damage/ experience of individuals. Both inform the **risk** level, which is the assessment of the likelihood and severity of harm materialising.	T/H/R are operationalised through THRIVE, Right Care Right Person model and Vulnerability Assessment Framework.
Force 41		FOI	N/A	N/A	Signposted to NDM.

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Table 2. Continued.

Author	THR domain	Policing domain	Definition	Conceptualisation	Operationalisation
Force 43		FOI	N/A	N/A	T/H/R operationalised through THRIVE, THRIVE + and DASH.
Force 5		FOI	N/A	Within the force-specific guidelines for the NDM model, **threat** is the communication of perceived intent to inflict **harm**, whilst **risk** is the likelihood of harm occurring.	T/H/R is operationalised through various tools such as BRAG model; RAG Model; DASH, MoRILE; THRIVE-*P* and NDM.
Forces 7 and 17		FOI	N/A	T/H/R conceptualised within the THRIVE model: **Threat** (or hazard) of reported incidents (from assaults to property loss, damage, physical hazards such as fire or risk of death to reputational loss), considering **harm** (or impact) associated with the threat and **risk** (or likelihood) they will occur.	T/H/R operationalised through the THRIVE and THRIVE+ model.
Force 8		FOI	**Threat –** anything that has the potential to cause harm. **Risk –** Likelihood that harm will be caused. **Harm –** Impact on person, community and organisation.	**Threat** and **Risk** are categorised in three ways: (1) explicit threats, (2) Situations of increased risk and (3) corporate or organisational T/H/R, latest including the National Intelligence Model.	T/H/R operationalised through NIM, THRIVES, THRIVE, MeRIT Risk Assessment, Threat Assessments and Hate Crime Action Plans.
Force 9		FOI	N/A	N/A	Signposted to THRIVE.
Heaton et al. (2019)	**T/H/R**	Operational Policing Practices	**Threat –** potential or actual harm to people, the probability of it occurring and the consequences or impact. **Harm** – foreseeable or avoidable negative outcome. **Risk** – potential or likelihood of an individual posing a threat in the future.	**Threat –** Conceptualised as an assessment of potential harm, involving probability and consequences to inform decision-making, interventions and responses. **Harm** – Conceptualised as an outcome to be prevented due to the low societal threshold for its occurrence and a retrospective focus on omission in duty. Increasingly tied to public vulnerability and institutional accountability. **Risk** – Conceptualised as a (quasi-) measurable construct used to guide decision-making but heavily influenced by public expectations and institutional frameworks.	**Threat** – Operationalised via threat assessments. **Harm** – Operationalised through the evaluation post-incident in accountability processes, often through judgments about failures to act, 'missed opportunities', or lack of professional curiosity. **Risk** – Operationalised through tools like risk matrices, risk scores (e.g. risk = likelihood × impact) and quasi-scientific frameworks. It's applied in policing via decision-making protocols (e.g. NDM), audit trails and assessments used to justify interventions or omissions, despite critiques about their reliability and subjectivity.

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Table 2. Continued.

Author	THR domain	Policing domain	Definition	Conceptualisation	Operationalisation
Hoggett and West (2021)	**Risk**	Public Order and Crowd Management	Risk refers to a level-based categorisation and the potential disorder or harm arising from individual groups or situations that may threaten public safety or order.	The conceptualisation of **risk** is the dynamic anticipation of potential disorder during football matches, often linked to specific groups of supporters or historical tensions.	Pre-defined categorisation (e.g. low, medium, high or increased risk), deploying specialised police officers (such as spotters and Public Order Trained Officers) and mobilising resources based on intelligence reports and historical data. Risk is assessed both, before and during events, with police adapting their tactics in real-time to manage any emerging disorder, ensuring resources are dynamically allocated based on changing circumstances.
Hoyle (2008)	**Harm and Risk**	Risk Assessment and Decision-Making Frameworks	**Harm –** the actual or potential danger experienced by a victim as a result of violence or the response to it. **Risk –** the unknown uncertainty, social construct, defined through risk factors in most incidents about the likelihood and potential severity of future harm occurring.	**Harm** – Conceptualised as immediate and/or long-term physical, psychological, emotional, social and economic damage as a preventable outcome. **Risk** – Conceptualised in the context of domestic violence policing as constructed, dynamic and situational estimation of the likelihood and severity of future harm.	**Harm** – Operationalisation through risk management frameworks, safety plans (including target hardening, routine adjustments, legal protections), tracked via the victim's own perception of danger, metrics that evaluate intervention outcomes. **Risk** – Operationalisation through the SPECCS model, using six cores to classify 'high risk': Separation, Pregnancy/New birth, Escalation, Cultural sensitivity, Stalking and Sexual assault, alongside a supplementary list of indicators (e.g. drug misuse, weapon threats, suicidal ideation), RARA model, training to transfer situational factors into formal risk scores, structured forms and checklists at various stages, risk categorisation. Note: Police actions decrease some risk levels but increase others through their action.

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Author	THR domain	Policing domain	Definition	Conceptualisation	Operationalisation
Kemshall (2003)	**Risk**	Operational Policing Practices	**Risk** refers to a social and political constructed concept that goes beyond the definition of danger and probability. It refers to the anticipation and management of potential future harm, often framed through statistical assessment and used to guide decisions within the criminal justice system.	The conceptualisation of **risk** is a deeply value-laden concept of voluntary risks and involuntary risk which an individual is imposed to without consent. Risk needs to be differentiated between personal and public risks as well as between low-probability, high-impact events and high-probability but low-impact occurrence. Risk within Criminal justice needs to be divided into (1) an artefact view (objectively measurable) and (2) a constructivist view (socio-political constructed phenomenon). Risk is used as an anticipatory measure whereby risk itself plays a dual role of individualising by assessing responsibility to offenders, but also objectifying by reducing individuals to quantifiable data points. Furthermore, risk is seen as dynamic, particularly through the concept of criminogenic needs which form risk makers.	Actuarial tools, statistical models, allow the prediction of likelihood for future offending or harm, based on aggregated data, allowing a risk categorisation (i.e. low, medium, high risk). Criminogenic needs form risk indicators, which, once correctional interventions are received, are deemed to reduce future offending. Standardised risk assessment tools such as structured interviews, checklists and decision-making flowcharts are used to ensure procedural consistency within decision-making, with the aim of controlling every potential risk.
Keningale et al. (2025)	**T/H/R**	Risk Assessment and Decision-Making Frameworks	**Threat** – a person or thing likely to cause danger or damage. **Harm** – likely level of damage or negative impact, encompasses ill-treatment or impairment of an individual's health and development, physical and non-physical abuse. **Risk** – threat possibility and likelihood that the threat or harm will occur.	**Threat** – Conceptualised as the cause or intent of potentially negative outcomes that proactively emerge, such as criminal activity or offender behaviour. **Harm** – Conceptualised as a future-orientated spectrum, grounded in potential severity through results or impact on how a threat materialises – defined narrowly such as physical injury or broadly such as emotional and developmental damage. **Risk** – Conceptualised as a heuristic balancing act of the connecting concept between threat and harm.	THRIVE is a dynamic, situational assessment to assist decision-making, shaped by policy shifts away from rigid checklists towards context-sensitive, professional judgment. THRIVE is linked to other policing frameworks like NDM, ILP and NIM. **Threat** – Operationalisation through intelligence, meetings, prioritisation, threat matrix and crime types. **Harm** – Operationalisation through legal/policy definition, severity assessment and victim safeguarding. **Risk** – Operationalisation through the likelihood estimations, heuristic judgment, shaped through resource allocation and inter-agency work.

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Table 2. Continued.

Author	THR domain	Policing domain	Definition	Conceptualisation	Operationalisation
Leach (2023)	**Threat and Risk**	Public Order and Crowd Management	**Threat** – Intend and capability for trouble. **Risk** – No formal definition, but was classified as on-the-job and in-the-job trouble, risk as uncertainty within decision-making	**Threat** – Conceptualised through subjective anticipation of possible disruption or disorder passed on professional judgment and often incomplete intelligence, also including socio-political threats. **Risk** – Conceptualised as a negotiable subjective estimate for 'on-the-job' risks (e.g. disorder) and 'in-the-job' risks (e.g. negative media coverage/ after-the-fact scrutiny), also conceptualised as intuitive terms, gut feeling or defensive thinking.	**Threat** – Operationalisation through risk categories ('normal' and 'risk' fans) and Gold strategy input influencing resource allocation, as well as media concerns causing reputational damage. **Risk** – Operationalisation strategically (in planning) and tactically (on the ground) through dynamic assessments, command-level negotiations, officer judgment and pre-determined definitions of 'unacceptable outcomes'. Note: Police also generate risk levels through their actions.
MI5 Security Service (n.d.)	**Threat**	Operational Context in Policing	**Threat** is defined as the likelihood of a terrorist attack.	**Threat** is conceptualised as the assessment and categorisation of a threat which described the potential and likelihood of a terrorist attack happening within the UK.	A terrorist threat is operationalised through its five-level classification, which is assessed via threat assessments that consider (1) available intelligence, (2) terrorist capabilities, (3) terrorist intentions and (4) timescale.
Oswald et al. (2018)	**Risk**		**Risk** refers to the forecasted likelihood of future offending.	**Risk** is conceptualised as a probabilistic forecast of an individual's likelihood to reoffend within 2 years, based on historical, demographic and contextual data. It reflects a categorisation (i.e. low, moderate or high) used to inform policing decisions and intervention strategies.	Risk is operationalised through the HART model by classifying individuals into low, moderate, or high-risk categories based on a combination of 34 predictor variables, primarily drawn from offending history, demographic information and geographic data. These categories reflect the predicted severity and likelihood of future offending within a two-year period, guiding eligibility for interventions such as the checkpoint programme.

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Author	THR domain	Policing domain	Definition	Conceptualisation	Operationalisation
Stott et al. (2018)	**Risk**	Public Order and Crowd Management	**Risk** is a flexible police classification referring to individuals or groups perceived to potentially threaten public order or engage in antisocial behaviour.	**Risk** is conceptualised as a multi-dimensional, dynamic and social construct that is purely behaviour based.	Categorisation of risk level underpins the operational planning, such as pre-determined intelligence gathering, risk level determination and resource planning. Once categorised, fans are managed through a range of interventions – non-coercive interactions helped to build interactions and to isolate 'risk groups', removal and surveillance. Note: Police also generate risk levels through their actions
Stott et al. (2021)	**Risk**	Public Order and Crowd Management	**Risk** is defined as a person, known or not, who might cause public order disruptions or antisocial order, whether spontaneous or planned, at or in connection to a football event.	**Risk** is conceptualised as a socially constructed, fluid and interactional phenomenon that is often misinterpreted through static, intelligence-led categorisations, leading to disproportionate and pre-emptive policing responses based on weak or poorly scrutinised intelligence rather than dynamic, situational evidence.	Pre-defined Categories (e.g. Category C-IR = increased risk) and intelligence-led labelling of individuals or groups, which determine planning, resource deployment and mobilisation as well as policing tactics.

Note. Also FOI-refusals with signposts have been added to the data extraction table.

Braun and Clarke (2021). The structured data analysis was conducted using a Word document to record the general study information, study characteristics, the section of the publication in which T/H/R was defined, an explicit definition of T/H/R and key conclusions. Coding was conducted on extracted material, with codes developed iteratively to capture recurring conceptual elements across sources. These codes were organised and refined to enable the identification and development of themes representing the core components of T/H/R.

Operationalisation

A structured deductive mixed-methods content analysis was employed to systematically identify and compare how T/H/R are operationalised across diverse sources. Despite efforts to distinguish the operationalisation of 'threat', 'harm' and 'risk', inconsistent usage often complicated differentiation. Operationalisation was defined as the process by which abstract concepts are translated into practical procedures, broken down into four components: (1) Identification (how T/H/R are recognised); (2) Identifier (who identifies them); (3) Assessment (tools or criteria used to evaluate severity or relevance) and (4) Action (operational responses or policies).

Data from all sources were compiled in an initial Excel spreadsheet, which captured all tools, frameworks and techniques utilised. FOI responses were reviewed and relevant hyperlinks, primarily to the College of Policing and individual police force websites, were recorded. Following this stage, a second spreadsheet was then created, including the source, text excerpts, the four operationalisation stages outlined above, interconnectedness of T/H/R, level of operational detail (none/low/medium/high) and clarity of operationalisation (implied/implicit/vague/explicit), along with general notes. This structured synthesis enabled the identification of commonalities and variations in how T/H/R are conceptualised and implemented across practice and policy documents.

Results

Definition of T/H/R

The following section will outline the first part of the research aim of how T/H/R are defined within policing. Table 3 presents both the shared and unique definitional elements of each construct.

Intent and motivation

The theme of 'Intent and Motivation' captures how threat and risk are often underpinned by perceptions, either explicit or implicit, of a person or group's intent to cause an adverse outcome, whilst harm remains relatively detached from this dimension.

Across multiple sources, threat is consistently linked to the notion of perceived or communicated intent. For example, Force 1 explicitly defines threat as a 'communicated or perceived intent to inflict harm or loss' on individuals, property or broader societal interests. Similarly, Force 2 describes a threat as 'communicated or perceived intent to inflict harm' with evaluating prompts asking officers to consider the credibility and origin of such an intent. Closely aligned, within the context of armed deployment, the College of Policing (2024c) states that threat assessments take into account 'the interaction of

Table 3. Themes of how T/H/R are defined within policing across academic, grey and FOI sources.

Theme	Threat	Harm	Risk
Intent and Motivation	Perceived or communicated	–	State of knowledge – possibility, uncertainty, unknown
Target	Individual, family, property, community, organisational reputation; Source of origin	Adverse impact – victims, vulnerable individuals, property	Exposure to outcomes – who/ what may be affected
Temporal Dimension	Past events		Forward-looking likelihood (probability of future outcome); Risk Factors; Quantifiable/ Measurability
Severity and Magnitude	Low, moderate, substantial, severe, critical	Severity of damage/loss; Impact	Quantitative chance – low, medium, high, Grade A or B1, Grade B2 or C, Grade C or D
Form and Modality	Concrete vs. abstract (e.g. verbal vs. public order); anything that causes injury, hazards, violence, disorder, damage, undesirable events, community cohesion, public safety, organisational reputation	Multi-dimensional – physical, emotional, financial, societal, psychological, reputational from – wrong – (in)action	Action-based outcomes – observable events representing risk

the known or suspected capability and intent of an individual, subject or group' (College of Policing, 2024c, section 'assess threat and risk and develop a working strategy'). Academic literature reflects similar findings. For instance, Strachan-Morris' definition of threat (2012; as cited in Leach, 2023) states that an individual or group must have both a capability and intent to cause trouble. As such, intent alone is not sufficient to constitute a credible threat. Rather, it must also encompass considerations of the subject's capability to act upon that intent.

Threat often interplays with risk within an operational context, whereby risk occupies an ambiguous position in relation to intent. For example, Force 3 refers to risk as the 'suspects […] capability' and 'their intent' to cause harm. This was also echoed in the work of Hoggett and West (2021) as well as Stott et al. (2021), who note in football policing, fans are categorised 'as risk' (e.g. Hoggett & West, 2021, p. 984) based on perceived intent, even if no disorder has yet occurred. The pre-emptive nature of the anticipator's logic (treating individuals on the potential motivation rather than actual behaviour), however, raises questions of such a classification and the subjectivity involved in such a decision-making. In fact, Leach (2023) provides a striking example, whereby the decision-making is not always directed by the subject's intent to cause an adverse outcome but sometimes reflects institutional and political concerns, whereby officers are more motivated by the intent to protect themselves from reputational damage rather than by concerns over actual physical threats. With this view, the intent behind assessments may not reside solely with the subject but also in defensive decision-making.

Target

The second theme concerns the intended or affected targets. For threat and harm, the focus is typically on identifiable individuals, communities, or organisational interests, whereas risk is understood in more probabilistic and situational terms. Across all three concepts, considerable variation exists in how targets are defined, with emphasis placed not only on direct targets, such as people and their safety, but also on more abstract considerations, such as public confidence. These variable definitions likely reflect the multi-faceted nature and increasingly complex set of responsibilities modern policing entails.

A threat is commonly framed as the potential recipient of an adverse outcome. This is particularly evident within the force-level documentation, which often refers to variations of the THRIVE risk assessment. For example, many police forces ask, 'Who or what is in danger?' (e.g. Forces 2 and 4) or, similarly, 'Towards Who? Or What?' (e.g. Force 11). Many FOI responses state prompts in relation to these questions to assess the threat to individuals and property. However, also broader conceptualisations of targets are listed with less tangible concerns like public safety, community cohesion or the reputation of an organisation. Whilst this reflects the dual targeting logic, the list of prompts to assess the target of a threat raises the question of which prompt police officers focus most on, and if they focus on all these aspects, which one will be deemed as more important, individuals, community or reputation. Of note is that some forces do not focus on who might be the target, which causes the adverse outcome, but rather on who might be the target for the police, that is, who is committing a potential crime. For example, Force 11, using the THRIVE and NDM model for the definition of threat as 'a person or circumstance likely to injure or cause damage'. The distinction between the target-centric and source-centric approaches highlights an inconsistency and a lack of conceptual clarity in how 'threat' is defined, as each approach shifts the focus of the same assessment in different directions, consequently leading to varied outcomes.

In contrast, definitions of harm focus on the experience or impact on victims and communities. FOIs showed that risk is often framed in terms of the possibility of harm occurring to a person or community (Forces 3, 6 and 8) but also to 'the victim, caller or environment' (Force 1) or 'organisational reputation' (Force 4). The College of Policing frequently references child abuse when defining 'significant harm', noting there is no absolute legal or medical standard, but their working definition includes targeting child victims online or in person (College of Policing, 2022a, 2022b). In a hate crime context, the notion of 'significant harm' is extended to include offences against '[…] individuals or groups with a particular characteristic(s) […]' (e.g. College of Policing, 2023a, e.g. section 'freedom of expression'). Additionally, broader legal frameworks such as the Health and Safety Act 1974 or Human Rights Act 1998 '[…] places specific demands on investigators to prevent and reduce the likelihood or impact of harm to people, their property or reputation […]' (College of Policing, 2023b, section 'managing threat, risk and harm').

In the context of risk, the concept of a target is more diffuse and conditional. Across both the academic and practice-based literature, definitions of risk suggest that anyone can be a target depending on exposure and situational dynamics. Whilst the College of Policing (2023c, section 'assessing risk') states to use risk assessment to identify 'whom it will or may affect', the academic literature seems to argue that targets of risk are more of an abstract nature. For example, Hoyle (2008) expands this definition further by showing how victim and perpetrator profiles shape risk assessments in the domestic abuse context, whereby victims' own perception of being targeted is treated as a critical risk indicator. In contrast, academic work highlights that in public order policing, large groups may be classified 'as risk' (e.g. Hoggett & West, 2021, p. 984; Stott et al., 2018, p. 7) based on police perceptions, even where no individual intent or harm has yet been demonstrated. This shows that risk targets are both socially constructed and context-dependent.

Temporal dimension

Another central theme is the 'temporal dimension', which captures the way in which threat and risk in particular are framed. The temporal nature of policing means that officers must not only respond to what has occurred but also anticipate what might happen next and evaluate the cumulative impact of the event over time.

Across policing resources, a threat is generally treated as present-tense, which carries significant actionability when perceived as credible and immediate. However, it should be noted that while the initial assessment of threat across police forces typically requires references to a form of occurrence or credible intelligence, the assessment of risk – which incorporates the assessment of a threat – can be based on conditions that have not yet materialised, much like the theme of 'Intent and Motivation', suggesting that perceived intentions are enough to represent a threat. This creates a contradiction: if the existence of a threat is a precondition for risk, but that threat is not yet realised, what exactly is being assessed? The anticipation of a threat is therefore paradoxically treated as though the threat already exists in order for risk to be evaluated.

Yet, the College of Policing (2024c, section 'threat assessment – definition') clearly states that threat assessment for armed deployment 'should be based on information known at the time' and 'may be supported by historic information'. This suggests that threats need to lie within the past to be assessed appropriately in the present. In fact, Force 8 indicates that threats – especially those involving explicit statements or indicators from intelligence – are sufficient to initiate protective measures. However, some forces acknowledge that a past event does not automatically constitute a present or future threat and therefore may simply be summarised as an incident, e.g. 'No threat: Burglary of garden shed two days ago with nothing taken' (Forces 7 and 17). Interestingly, while these forces explicitly separate past incidents from threats, others treat past incidents as evidence of ongoing, present threats: 'Victim has had eggs thrown at her window and the offenders have shouted at her to go back to her own country' (Force 15). Once a threat has been identified, officers are instructed to link evidence and its interpretation to the actionability of the threat by 'document[ing] a shortened version of what has been reported' (Force 15). Although this variation may reflect missing rational for why certain incidents are classified as threats (i.e. whether hostility implies future harm or shouting alone constitutes a 'threat'), the contrasting examples foreground a temporal contradiction in how forces distinguish between threats and incidents.

Risk, defined as 'a synthesis of threat and harm' (Force 37), reflects the likelihood of a threat materialising and the severity of resulting harm (e.g. Force 15). It is anticipatory rather than fixed: a measure of how likely threat and/or harm is to occur and when (College of Policing, 2023c, section 'assessing risk). Consequently, as risk assessments integrate static (historical) and dynamic (situational) factors (College of Policing, 2023c, section 'assessing risk'), risk is captured as retrospective and forward-looking, often making the past and the projected future appear more intelligible than the complexity of the present. Within THRIVE, risk is 'the likelihood of harm occurring' (e.g. Force 40) or '[…] likelihood or potential of the threat occurring' (Forces 7, 17 and 6). Force 3 frames risk through likelihood and intent: 'How likely is the harm to occur? Does the suspect have the capability, and what is their intent?' Officers may also evaluate risk as immediate or 'slow-time', assessing whether it is 'likely, unlikely, not known' (Force 2). This framing is echoed in the academic literature. For instance, Heaton et al. (2019) emphasise the difficulty of assessing risk as an estimate of 'the likelihood of an individual posing a threat in the future […]' (p. 158). Likewise, Garland (2003, as cited in Hoyle, 2008) distinguishes between threat and risk by noting that 'danger' represents a potential for harm inherent '[…] in a person or situation […]', whereas 'risk' constitutes a measure of the '[…] likelihood and extent […]' of that potential manifesting over time (in Hoyle, 2008, p. 50). These perspectives underline that risk is not static but is always shaped by its position within temporal sequences.

Severity and magnitude

The theme of severity and magnitude captures how the threat, harm and particularly risk are framed in terms of their intensity, seriousness and potential or actual impact. What becomes evident is that harm levels are primarily framed in the context of the severity of (potential) adverse outcome, whereas threat and especially risk are more often described/framed through operational lenses, shaped by considerations of police power, demand capacity and resource availability.

Threat tends to reflect potential severity rather than confirmed or calculated harm. For example, MI5 (n.d.) outlines '[…] 5 categories at which the threat level could be set […]', namely low, moderate, substantial, severe and critical, all reflecting the likelihood of a terrorist attack.

Similarly, Force 6 assesses the likelihood of threats by asking 'What is the immediacy of the threat?', without, however, instructing officers to establish a threat level. Force 15 follows a similar approach by stating that 'the imminent threat of violence to persons or damage to property, serious offences in progress, the presence of suspects at scenes or potential evidence loss would dictate a more urgent response', suggesting that threat levels are established without being formally defined.

Across multiple policing sources, harm was defined not merely by whether something negative occurs but by how damaging that outcome was likely to be. For example, Force 2 asks about the extent of the 'Level of injury? Death?' and 'Level of damage or loss?'. Similarly, Force 6 provides officers with the prompt of 'What is the extent of the harm/damage/loss that has been caused?'. Whilst this example is interesting in that it distinguishes between damage, loss and harm – implying that harm is a separate concept – the force does not specify how officers assess the 'extent' of harm nor how these contexts are distinct. As such, it is unclear how, for example, potentially short-term physical injuries, such as broken bones, are classified as 'high' harm due to the immediate damage to the body, or as 'medium' or 'low' harm because they may have no long-term impact on the individual or the wider public. In that respect, Force 7 and Force 17 outlined the THRIVE+ model, which provides guidance on assessing harm levels. According to this model, high harm includes 'Threat of Life/Life changing injury (Homicide/Suicide/T2 K/Rape/SSO/RTC)', medium to high harm encompasses 'serious physical/mental injuries that require medical treatment but from which recovery will be prolonged (GBH/Self-harm/TTK/Serious Sexual Offences/RTC)', medium to low harm refers to 'physical/mental injuries that requires medical treatment but from which a full recovery is likely' and low level to 'none' involves 'minor/temporary physical/mental injuries that don't require medical treatment'. While the boundaries between these categories may still appear ambiguous – raising questions about the extent of subjectivity and medical knowledge expected of call handlers using this model – these remain the only examples among 43 FOI responses that provided concrete definitions of harm levels.

In policing, risk is understood in terms of both the likelihood of an event and the severity of its consequences. Heaton et al. (2019) noted that 'total risk scores in policing are sometimes calculated using a formula such as "risk = likelihood × impact" (e.g. Police and Crime Commissioner for Essex, 2012) or by use of a "risk matrix"' (p. 156). These tools aim to translate subjective judgments into quantifiable categories to guide operational decisions, though definitions of 'low', 'medium' or 'high' risk are often vague. For instance, Force 11 employs a risk matrix, the College of Policing (2023c, section 'assessing risk') uses a four-tier scale from 'low' to 'very high' for missing persons and Force 7 links risk levels to response times, yet detailed criteria are generally missing. However, some models provide clearer guidance. For example, Force 7 and Force 17 use the THRIVE+ model, which defines 'high' as 'almost certain/ongoing/crime in action (likely Graded A Response)'. By contrast, academic literature indicates that Durham Police's HART (Harm Assessment Risk Tool) model defines 'high-risk' in terms of the predicted likelihood of serious offences (defined as murder, aggravated violence, robbery, sexual offences or firearm offences) occurring within two years (Oswald et al., 2018). Alternatively, Force 15 defines 'high-risk' through repeated incidents with potential for escalating harm. These examples highlight a broader tendency to conflate probability with potential harm: risk assessments rarely measure likelihood alone, but almost always incorporate severity to guide operational responses. This integration of severity is central to ethical and operational decision-making. Force 15 instructs first responders to consider whether events are ongoing or may escalate when assigning risk grades of 'low, medium or high […]' (Force 15). Similarly, the College of Policing (2013, section 'principle 3) notes that '[…] something may be extremely serious if it happens, but highly unlikely to occur at a particular time. A person can be killed crossing a road, but this does not – and should not – stop people from crossing roads. If the potentially serious outcome is unlikely to happen, then it can be a wise risk to take' (section 'Principle 3'), highlighting the need to weigh severity alongside probability.

Form and modality

The theme of 'Form and Modality' examines how threat and harm are expressed and perceived through different modalities, ranging from physical and verbal to emotional, digital, social or institutional forms. Policing and academic sources show significant variation in interpretation depending on the mode, affecting what is considered actionable, measurable or legitimate – for example, Force 6 distinguishes damage and loss from harm.

There is no singular or uniform form a threat may take. Police forces generally define a threat as 'anything that has the potential to cause harm' (Force 38), but the modalities, that is, the ways in which a threat is expressed or understood, are varied and context-dependent. As outlined in relation to the theme 'Target', officers are initially guided to consider threats that emerge from or are directed towards individuals, property, public safety, community cohesion or organisational reputation (e.g. Force 4). However, it is evident that threats may present themselves as explicit and implicit. For example, explicit threats might include direct statements or acts intended to kill, injure, damage or destroy property (e.g. Force 11). Implicit threats, on the other hand, may involve more abstract outcomes, such as disruption of the King's Peace, interference with the normal functioning of civil society or reputational damage (e.g. Forces 7 and 17). Two police forces also offered the form a reputational threat might take. Force 4, for instance, describes 'the threat of what could happen if no action is taken'. Here, the modality lies in potential inaction, where failure to respond effectively may itself be perceived as a threat. Force 8 elaborated that such inaction can be judged against the force's ability to meet its objectives and against public perception of safety. Furthermore, Force 8 acknowledged that reputational threats could arise from poor performance or mishandling of incidents. Even when incidents are minor or fall under existing policies, they may still require a rapid and effective response to prevent escalation and maintain public confidence. In a parallel logic, within the academic discourse, Leach (2023) contends that officers may perceive a threat as the concept of 'in-the-job trouble'. The author argues that such threats carry the potential to damage careers, a concern that was acknowledged by the College of Policing: '[…] making risk decisions has become associated with blame, fear, internal and external inquiries and, therefore, something to be avoided'' (College of Policing (2018, Ch. 1.1), as cited in Leach, 2023, p. 63).

Harm is the concept most explicitly linked to diverse modalities. Whilst some police forces keep their forms of harm broad – such as Force 6 stating 'to hurt or injure someone or to cause damage or loss' – others define harm with reference to its physical, psychological, emotional and financial dimensions (e.g. Force 15). Whilst some police forces state that these modalities can include 'injure, damage, loss or hurt' (e.g. Force 1 and Force 2), others, such as Force 3, provide a more elaborate definition:

> 'HARM relates to physical (injury to persons, property damage or disruption to a community), emotional (Trauma, fear or stress that diminishes a sense of safety or cohesion), financial (a loss to personal or business or the cost to a community of repair or restoration to physical property and infrastructure) and societal forms (any erosion of public trust, breakdown of community networks and stability).'

Notably, Force 7 and Force 17 further expand on this list by explicitly including aspects such as 'community trust and confidence in policing, public perception of safety, etc.', suggesting that public sentiment and legitimacy are themselves seen as potential sites of harm.

Operationalisation of T/H/R

This section reports the structured deductive mixed-method content analysis, mapping how T/H/R are operationalised across policing tools and frameworks (categories: identification, identifier, assessment, action). As shown in Table 4, the analysis revealed a diverse landscape of 35 instruments, varying in format, scope and institutional embedding. The depth of information has been divided into explicit (i.e. added hyperlinks or additional documents within the FOI), implicit (i.e. explanation of the tools within the main paper or FOI) and symbolic (i.e. merely mentioned without explanation or hyperlinking). Together, they illustrate a patchwork in which assessments of T/H/R are shaped by national models, local adaptations and discretionary practices.

Table 4. Distribution of the operationalisation of identified tools and frameworks for T/H/R assessment.

Tools/ Frameworks	Frequency	Explicit	Implicit	Mentioned only	Identification	Identifier	Assessment	Action guidance	Mentions by source type
ARMS	2	–	1	1	0/2	1/2	1/2	0/2	FOI ($n = 1$); GL ($n = 1$)
BRAG	1	–	1	–	0/1	1/1	0/1	0/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
Code of Ethics*	2	1	–	1	0/2	0/2	0/2	0/2	FOI ($n = 1$); GL ($n = 1$)
DASH**	8	4	–	4	3/8	5/8	4/8	3/8	FOI ($n = 8$)
EMMIE	1	–	–	1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	GL ($n = 1$)
FGM	1	1	–	–	1/1	0/1	1/1	1/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
HART Model	1	1	–	–	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1	
Hate Crime Action Plan	1	–	–	1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
Joint Decision Model	1	–	1	–	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
KIRAT	1	–	–	1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
MASIP	1	–	–	1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	GL ($n = 1$)
MeRIT Assessment	1	–	1	–	0/1	1/1	1/1	1/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
MoRILE	1	–	–	1	0/1	0/1	1/1	0/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
NDM***	16	8	4	4	8/16	6/16	7/16	7/16	FOI ($n = 10$); GL ($n = 4$); AL ($n = 2$)
NIM	2	–	–	1	0/2	0/2	0/2	0/2	AL ($n = 1$), GL ($n = 1$)
OSP	1	–	–	1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
PLANE	1	–	–	1	0/2	0/2	0/2	0/2	FOI ($n = 1$); GL ($n = 1$)
PPN	1	–	1	–	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	GL ($n = 1$)
Questioning Technique	2	–	2	–	2/2	2/2	0/2	0/2	FOI ($n = 2$)
RAG	1	–	–	1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
RARA Model	1	–	2	–	0/2	0/2	1/2	1/2	FOI ($n = 2$)
RE-THRIVE	4	–	1	3	1/4	3/4	1/4	0/4	FOI ($n = 4$)
Orange Book	1	–	–	1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
Risk Principles	6	3	–	3	0/6	3/6	3/6	0/6	FOI ($n = 3$); GL ($n = 3$)
SAR model	1	1	–	–	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
THRIVE	19	3	13	3	11/19	13/19	15/19	6/19	FOI ($n = 16$); AL ($n = 1$); GL ($n = 2$)
THRIVE (-sp)	1	–	1	–	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
THRIVE+ S	1	–	–	1	1/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
THRIVE SC	1	1	–	–	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
THRIVE-P	1	–	–	1	0/1	1/1	0/1	1/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
THRIVE+	3	–	1	1	2/3	2/3	2/3	2/3	FOI ($n = 3$)
THRIVES	1	–	1	–	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1	FOI ($n = 1$)
THRVA	1	1	–	–	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1	FOI ($n = 1$)

Note. Implicit indicates institutional presence but limited operational clarity; Explicit denotes concreate information, documents or hyperlink; *The Code of Ethics, which is embedded within the NDM, was not counted as a separate category unless it was explicitly referenced on its own; **While some police forces stated their intention to replace DASH with DARA from autumn 2025, DARA was excluded as it is not yet operationalised; ***One additional count was added for the NDM, as the College of Policing (2024c) adapted its guidelines based on this model.

The most frequently cited frameworks were THRIVE (*n* = 17) and the National Decision Model (NDM; *n* = 16), DASH (*n* = 6) and the College of Policing's Ten Risk Principles (2013; *n* = 6), followed by more limited applications. THRIVE was mostly embedded implicitly (13 of 17 cases), while the NDM showed a mix of explicit (8), implicit (4) and symbolic (4) use. Other tools, such as DASH (explicit in 4 of 6) and SAR (1 of 1 explicit), were applied prescriptively. Eleven further tools (e.g. MoRILE, Orange Book, PLANE) were referenced only nominally, suggesting either limited disclosure through FOI or largely symbolic use. Operationalisation ranged along a spectrum from prescriptive checklists to flexible frameworks and algorithmic models. At the prescriptive end, structured tools like DASH and FGM templates rely on pre-defined indicators and binary responses, creating the appearance of objectivity while reintroducing subjectivity through ambiguous thresholds (e.g. 12 of DASH's 27 questions are bolded without explanation: DASH Risk Checklist Website, n.d.). By contrast, algorithmic approaches such as the HART shift discretion into computational systems (Oswald et al., 2018). Using 34 behavioural and demographic predictors, HART forecasts reoffending but with declining accuracy (68.5–62.8% overall; high-risk predictions fell from 72.6% to 52.7%). While misclassification of high-risk as low-risk was low (2.4%), agreement with custody officers was only 56.2%. HART deliberately overestimates risk and, as Oswald et al. stress, functions as decision support rather than a substitute for discretion.

Between these poles sit frameworks such as THRIVE, which provide broad categories – Threat, Harm, Risk, Investigation, Vulnerability, Engagement – yet leave interpretation of these concepts to officers (College of Policing, 2021). Supplementary guidance, such as the 'three Cs' (communication, clues, curiosity), remains general and open-ended. Ethical decision-making models such as the NDM further highlight variation. T/H/R feature prominently in Elements 3 (threat and risk assessment). In routine contexts, this is operationalised through reflective questions (College of Policing, 2024a), whereas in specialist domains such as firearms command, it becomes tightly structured, requiring continuous reassessment and explicit documentation (College of Policing, 2024c). Other forces reported force-specific questioning methods for call handlers (e.g. Forces 12 and 26), but with little detail, leaving their content opaque.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that while all tools use T/H/R as core mechanisms to guide operational decisions, their operationalisation varies considerably. In checklist tools, subjectivity emerges through ambiguous weighting; in frameworks such as THRIVE, it is embedded as a feature; in the NDM, it oscillates between reflection and procedural rigour depending on context; and in algorithmic models such as HART, it is displaced onto datasets and computational proxies. This diversity reflects different institutional choices about whether to constrain, enable or externalise professional judgement, with significant implications for consistency, transparency and legitimacy in how T/H/R is recognised in policing practice.

Identification

The theme of 'Identification' refers to categorising a situation, individual or event as being T/H/R across the 35 operational tools and frameworks. The most cited were THRIVE (19 mentions, rising to 28 when considering the full THRIVE family), the NDM (16) and DASH (8), together accounting for over half of recorded identification practices. Despite variation across checklists, data-driven models, frameworks and elicitation techniques, commonalities emerge in how identification is operationalised.

First, all approaches treat identification of risk or T/H/R as the entry point for decision-making, yet guidance is often partial or implicit. Tools such as DASH and FGM templates provide structured questions and pre-defined indicators, but weighting and thresholds remain opaque, leaving officers to interpret significance (Force 38; gov.uk, 2017). Similarly, the THRIVE family (RE-THRIVE, THRIVE-SP, THRIVE+S, THRIVE SC, THRIVE+, THRIVES), provide categories for control room assessments but relies heavily on officer judgment. With 19 references across the dataset, THRIVE clearly dominates contemporary practice in England and Wales, yet forces itself to describe it as a 'subjective risk assessment toolkit' (Forces 7 and 17). The academic literature reinforces this point, noting that officers often struggled to define or differentiate between concepts such as T/H/R (Keningale et al., 2025). Even the NDM, with its more formalised stages, ultimately relies on open-ended questioning. Several police forces, including Force 5, 14 and 34, referred to the College of Policing guidelines (2024a), stating formulations that provide little methodological clarity and leave scope for variable interpretation, such as 'How probable is the risk of harm?' (College of Policing, 2024a, section 'assessment – assess threat and risk and develop a working strategy'). Notably, although stage 3 of the NDM is titled 'assess threat and risk', the accompanying prompts refer only to the 'risk of harm' (College of Policing, 2024a). This suggests a misalignment between the frameworks stated focus and its operational guidance, which may lead to confusion in practice and inconsistency in how officers interpret and apply these key components.

Second, identification is marked by high subjectivity, both in how tools are applied and how categories are understood. THRIVE ostensibly structures assessment across six domains – Threat, Harm, Risk, Investigation, Vulnerability and Engagement – but offers little guidance on balancing them, suggesting a trade-off between these concepts on a subjective basis. In fact, as Keningale et al. (2025) observe, such assessments are heuristic, shaped by officer intuition and situational judgement. One participant admitted: 'There is still a subjective element around how you assess the risk and the other elements' (p. 14). This subjectivity extends to risk-level classifications themselves. Leach (2023) found participants struggled to articulate what 'low', 'medium' or 'high', describing them as 'foggy' or jokingly 'higher than low but lower than high' (p. 73). Hoyle (2008) similarly noted officers often relied on 'gut feeling' in domestic disputes-adaptable but prone to strategic downgrading to avoid 'system overload' (p. 331).

Practice examples echo these findings. Force 15 reported that while THRIVE SC informs incident grading, final responsibility rests with call managers; Force 4 noted that Force Incident Managers overrule tool outputs when necessary. In domestic abuse cases, Force 8 explained that although DASH generates automatic Bronze/Silver/Gold ratings, officers can override results, with some systems mandating fixed classifications for repeat incidents. Force 27 instructed officers to use DASH alongside known indicators but provided no thresholds, again leaving discretion to fill gaps.

Taken together, these commonalities suggest that the identification of T/H/R is less a matter of uniform procedure than of interpretive practice. The lack of definitional clarity across all tools, combined with the centrality of professional discretion, means that outcomes often depend more on how individual officers or police forces embed and interpret frameworks than on the tools themselves.

Identifier

The theme of 'Identifier' reflects the actors deemed responsible for recognising and assessing T/H/R. In datasets where the T/H/R identifier was explicitly addressed, responsibility was most frequently assigned to frontline officers or call takers at the point of initial contact. Some documents stated that officers were expected to apply a designated framework at the scene, while others suggested that call handlers may initiate a preliminary assessment.

Across 14 tools and frameworks that specified an identifier, three overarching categories of responsible actors were established: (1) first contact/call handler, (2) generic role references and (3) systems and intelligence input. The most prominent category was that of 'first contact/call handling', associated with a total of 10 tools. This category included actors such as call takers, control room staff and front desk personnel. FOI responses in particular highlighted the use of structured decision-making models, primary following a sequential logic of T/H/R assessment. Chief among these was the THRIVE model, including several localised or modified variants (e.g. THRIVE+ and Re-THIRVE). These tools were used to guide initial triage and inform further operational decisions.

In the context of 'frontline response' – encompassing officers, staff and probation practitioners – the literature and FOI responses again pointed to the centrality of structured assessments in the identification of T/H/R. Variants such as THRIVE-P and RE-THRIVE were widely cited. In addition, the ARMS tools, referenced in materials from Force 13, were noted for their role in MOSOVO. This aligns with grey literature depictions of ARMS as a dynamic, offender-focused tool, designed to assess and manage the risk of serious harm (College of Policing, 2023c). Another key tool in this category was the DASH risk assessment checklist. This was referenced as mandatory for the assessment of domestic abuse incidents. For instance, Force 5 and Force 38 cited the DASH Checklist Website (n.d.), which states: 'initial risk identification must be undertaken by asking ALL the questions on this checklist, as well as searching appropriate databases, such as the intelligence databases' (second paragraph). This suggests that DASH straddles both frontline practice and intelligence-led processes, thereby also fitting within the following category.

Across both, literature and FOI responses, the role of 'digital systems and algorithmic support' tools emerged as increasingly silent in risk operationalisations. Along the NDM, ICT systems were cited for their utility in aggregating data and enhancing situational awareness (e.g. Force 7 and Force 17). The HART model represents a notable development in data-driven risk profiling, indicative of a broader trend towards algorithmically supported decision-making (Oswald et al., 2018). This reflects an institutional logic aimed at managing complexity, uncertainty and resource prioritisation for structured professional judgement, augmented by technology input.

Action

In operational action terms, T/H/R severity grading serves as a gateway mechanism to determine incident response grades, which influence dispatch urgency, resource allocation and escalation pathways (e.g. Force 4). Consequently, this thematic focus on 'action' explores how T/H/R is operationalised and how it shapes institutional policing practices across various tools and frameworks, outlined in Table 5. Importantly, these tools do not function merely as a categorisation mechanism. Instead, they embed practical action steps, escalation routes and decision-making criteria that determine the institutional response to T/H/R. Notably, most outlined tools and frameworks lack clear documentation of referral or follow-up actions, suggesting inconsistencies or ambiguity in procedural guidance across forces.

Deployment response and operational planning. In the broader 'Action' category, the 'Deployment Response and Operational Planning' sub-category examines how assessment tools and frameworks facilitate or hinder police deployment and prioritise action-oriented frameworks. Models such as the THRIVE family act as triage tools, categorising incidents in real time based on T/H/R assessments. Grading then informs response timeframes, deployment and safeguarding. As noted under 'Identifier', such models are particularly influential in control rooms, yet the actions following grading are often vague or inconsistently reported. For example, the SAR model is described as an 'operational circuit' in which the 'system decides the grade', but little detail is given on subsequent steps (Traynor, 2024, cited by Force 13). FOI responses reflect this variability. Force 33

Table 5. Classification of T/H/R-action in line with their respective operational pathways.

Category	Operationalisation	Key T/H/R-related actions	Additional notes
Deployment Response and Operational Planning	NDM	Response grading for deployment decision	Used to justify legal/operational actions. Legal and Ethical Decision-Making
		In the context of armed deployment: briefing, joint planning, intelligence sharing, safeguarding	–
	THRIVE/THRIVE+/ RE-THRIVE/THRVA/ THRIVE (-sp)/ THRIVES	Grading set deployment decision, response time within a prevention focus; partnership referrals	THRIVE models often underpin engagement, investigation and safeguarding without specifying the *how* of actions
	SAR model/	Grading sets police response	–
	Questioning technique	Identifying investigation opportunities, providing safeguarding advice	
Referral	DASH	Garding incidents in accordance with Demand Management policy, creating NICHE occurrence, Investigation, referrals to partner agencies (e.g. MARAC, MAPPA), immediate safeguarding actions, providing IDVA, TecSAFE phone, DVPNs, DVPOs	Used to justify legal/operational actions
	MeRIT	Referrals to support victims and manage offenders in relevant departments	–
	FGM Guidelines/ Checklist	Mandatory referral to police for children under 18, information sharing with GP, local safeguarding procedures	–
	HART model	Intervention* based on algorithmic risk level	

Note. DVPNs stands for 'Domestic violence protection notices'; DVPOs stands for 'Domestic violence protection orders'; *Interventions were not described in detail but based on the Checkpoint programme (out of court disposal) and tailored to offender needs.

reported that THRIVE enables officers to 'decide if and how to engage' without clarifying what engagement entails. By contrast, Force 4's documentation specifies six graded responses: (1) emergency (15–20 min), (2) priority (60 min), (3) priority-24 (within 24 h), (4) scheduled (remote contact within 24 h), (5) appointment (in-person within 48 h) and (6) other (no deployment or referral). Such contrasts suggest that while some forces codify actions, others rely more heavily on officer discretion, producing variable practice. In addition to guiding deployments, the THRIVE model also operates as a justification framework. Force 4, for instance, requires full documentation of the THRIVE assessment to justify decisions taken.

The College of Policing (2024a), cited by Force 34, makes an important point: rather than prescribing specific steps, it highlights the subjective and often complex nature of determining appropriate actions. Instead, it instructs officers to weigh 'the impact of potential actions on the situation and the public' and to 'implement the option you have selected' (sections 'options' and 'action and review'). This reflects policing's professional judgement model, where discretion, ethics and situational reflection outweigh rigid procedure. Forces 7 and 17 echoed this: 'The best course of action should be decided, and a rationale noted on the CAD, if necessary'. Force 8 extended the point, noting that the NDM encourages alignment with the Code of Ethics and discretionary judgement. This discretionary ethos is reinforced by Christie (2020), who found the NDM functions less as real-time guidance and more as post-hoc justification. Pursuit officers described it as 'ingrained' and almost subconscious (p. 5), with one noting that 'police can self-authorise, they need to justify their decision in line with NDM afterwards' (p. 3).

Referral. Within the 'Action' category, the 'Referral' sub-category explains how T/H/R assessment prompts safeguarding actions via referrals and multi-agency responses. These frameworks go beyond internal decision-making and seek to integrate policing responses with wider support systems. For example, Force 8 utilises the MeRIT assessment, a digital form including vulnerability, specific sections (e.g. Domestic Abuse, Child Abuse, Hate Crime). This enables accurate referrals to victim support units and offender management teams. Slightly different, the FGM guidelines (gov.uk, 2017 cited by Force 13) make clear that assessors must take decisive actions, and where uncertainty exists, they are expected to consult designated safeguarding leads.

By contrast, tools like the HART model adopt a data-driven, algorithmic approach. HART predicts the likelihood of reoffending based on historical data and uses this to determine intervention levels. For instance, only individuals classified as 'moderate risk' (likely to reoffend in non-serious ways within 2 years) are eligible for the Checkpoint programme, a diversionary intervention aimed at reducing offending. The use of HART reflects a more systemic, offender-focused approach to risk, rather than the victim-centred emphasis seen in other tools.

In tools such as DASH, the attending officer, not control room staff, conducts the assessment. As used by Force 27, DASH includes a structured checklist that determines whether an individual is at high risk and mandates corresponding safeguarding actions. These include referrals to MARAC or MAPPA panel and high-risk cases. Where the risk threshold is not met, alternative services referral is made (SafeLives, n.d. cited by Force 13). Despite this prescriptive structure, DASH is also used to justify police actions retrospectively. Officers are instructed to record a rationale for both decisions and actions as seen in Force 27 guidance: '[…] document the rationale for any decisions […]' (section 'summary') or 'the decisions/actions and justification for them must be recorded accurately' (section 'securing the safety of the victim/children and vulnerable adults). DASH operates as a decision-making and accountability tool, ensuring T/H/R response and institutional transparency.

Lack of standardisation

One of the most striking findings is the absence of standardisation in how T/H/R are understood, conceptualised and operationalised across forces. Although national frameworks such as THRIVE and the NDM are promoted as universal, their interpretation varies, producing a fragmented and inconsistent landscape. Divergent definitions illustrate this clearly. For instance, Force 6 defines 'threat' as 'a person or circumstance likely to cause damage or danger', while Force 39 frames it as 'who or what is in danger', focusing instead on the potential victim. Despite collaboration between these forces, one emphasises the cause, the other the target. Such contrasts highlight how even 'standardised' models are mediated by local interpretation. Forces are aware of this variation: Force 4 acknowledged that '[…] Police Forces do not use generic systems or identical procedures to capture and record data therefore responses from Force 4 should not be used as a comparison with any other force response you receive […]', while declining to provide its own conceptualisations. This reluctance underscores the decentralised, negotiated nature of THRIVE's use. The proliferation of adaptations reinforces this point. Across the dataset, nine variants were identified (THRIVE, THRIVES, THRIVE+S, THRIVE+, THRIVE-P, THRIVE SC, THRIVES, RE-THRIVE, THRVA). Some forces produce internal training and frameworks, but most still cite College guidance – despite inconsistencies in that very guidance. For example, while THRIVE promotes T/H/R assessment, it simultaneously warns that '[…] the police should not assume responsibility, directly or indirectly, for all forms of risk […]' (College of Policing, 2021, section 'framework for support'). Such contradictions leave officers unclear about what action follows identification. As Force 11 put it, 'forces can decide how they want to use the THRIVE […]', acknowledging its discretionary character. This widespread ambiguity likely explains why references to THRIVE in the dataset were predominantly implicit rather than explicit. However, questions remain about the effectiveness of modified THRIVE models and whether they have been tested.

A similar tension exists between THRIVE and the NDM. THRIVE is widely used at first contact, but the NDM is promoted as universal (College of Policing, 2024a). Keningale et al. (2025) noted that both act as heuristic, reflective prompts, but also observed 'conflict … and interoperability' (p. 16) between them. Without clarity on how they relate, duplication and inefficiency arise, with overlapping assessments (e.g. NDM stages 2–4 replicate THRIVE categories). Local adaptations seek to resolve this: Force 11 removed 'investigation' and 'engagement' from THRVA, while Force 35 suggested linking THRIVE to a specific NDM stage, and Force 4 viewed THRIVE as a simplified NDM.

Confusion, however, deepens when guidance encourages cross-referencing. Missing persons risk assessments, for instance, are advised to draw on the Risk Principles, the NDM and the Code of Ethics (College of Policing, 2023d). Yet the NDM already integrates the Code, leaving unclear whether it should also be applied independently. The College's Ten Risk Principles (2013) compound this, citing key terms like 'harm' and 'reasonable' without definitions and issuing contradictory advice – for example, Principle 7 allows discretion over recording decisions but warns that failure to document may attract criticism. Such ambiguity risks paralysing rather than clarifying practice.

Discussion

This review began with one question: what constitutes T/H/R and who gets to write the rules? To address this, the review drew on 10 academic sources, 14 policing publications and 43 FOI responses, revealing far from a settled lexicon for their definition, conceptualisation and/or operationalisation. T/H/R are not neutral descriptors; they are contested instruments – elastic enough to stretch across contexts, slippery enough to resist precision and potent enough to shape priorities without scrutiny. Despite their centrality, the definitions and extensive operationalisations of T/H/R remain contested and fragmented rather than scrutinised and evaluated. This complexity also demonstrates that current police T/H/R frameworks are not user-friendly. Importantly, this review also found that while numerous dimensions of T/H/R are described across sources, there is limited empirical or theoretical work that systematically examines how these dimensions interact in relation to one another. As such, the findings reflect a descriptive aggregation of elements rather than an integrated model of their interrelationships.

Definition

The review was split into two strands. Initially, a content analysis and reflexive thematic analysis to establish the definition. The analysis highlighted recurring themes across the literature and FOI, identifying shared and distinct characteristics in how T/H/R are defined.

Based on the findings, the researcher proposes the following working definitions of T/H/R. A single definition for each term was formulated through negotiation among competing operational, legal and subjective perspectives. To help this negotiation, the constituent elements associated with each term (e.g. in the case of 'threat': capability and intent, implicit or explicit, target-centric versus source-centric orientations, temporal focus, differing modalities and degrees of severity) were identified in order to prevent the definitions from relying on prior assumptions and to ground them instead in the data generated by this study. These elements should not be interpreted as discrete or mutually exclusive categories but rather as overlapping dimensions that may occur in practice. However, due to inconsistency within the literature, it was not possible to systematically map their interactions or weightings (i.e. low/medium/high). Instead, they are presented as indicative dimensions that collectively illustrate the conceptual breadth of each construct. The definitions were primarily developed from information obtained through FOI responses. To maintain coherence and practical applicability while preserving conceptual complexity, bureaucratic language was intentionally avoided in favour of terminology that reflects lived experience and structural conditions. To start with, threat is proposed to be defined as follows:

> Threat is defined as the perceived or communicated intent – whether relating to present or anticipated future incidents – that arises from specific persons, groups or circumstances with

> the aim of causing negative outcomes directed at individuals, groups, property, public safety or organisational reputation. Threats can be abstract or concrete and may take various forms, including physical actions, verbal or non-verbal signals, public disorder, hazards, or damage to property, categorised by their severity.

While this definition incorporates multiple dimensions (e.g. temporality and intentionality), it does not assume that these operate independently. In practice, threat is likely constituted through the interaction of these dimensions. For example, how perceived intent interacts with the capability or temporal proximity influences the perceived severity. However, current evidence base does not provide sufficient granularity to formally model these relationships, and doing so would require further empirical investigation. Unlike Flanagan's (2008) framing of threat as pressure on police institutions, the current framing foregrounds hostile intent at the level of interactions rather than institutional capacity. The inconsistency may partly stem from the Home Office's Green paper (2008), which publicly endorsed aspects of Flanagan's proposal but conspicuously refrained from embedding his T/H/R principle within official discourse. This omission not only created interpretive ambiguity but also diluted the potential for a coherent and operationally grounded framework.

Harm, on the other hand, is victim-centred, encompassing actual or anticipated adverse consequences. Synthesising the findings, the researcher proposes the following working definition:

> Harm is actual or anticipated adverse consequences – whether immediate or future – for individuals, communities, organisations or property. The severity of harm may be amplified by vulnerability or accumulated effect. It includes physical (e.g. injury), emotional or psychological (e.g. fear, trauma, mental impairment), financial (e.g. property damage) and societal or community (e.g. breakdown of trust, loss of cohesion, increased disorder) impact, as well as risk of reoffending and organisational consequences such as reputational damage from inactions or wrongful actions.

As with threat, the dimension of harm is not an isolated variable but may intersect and compound with one another. For instance, psychological harm may amplify societal harm or repeated low-level harm may accumulate into a significant long-term impact. Yet, the reviewed literature does not consistently articulate these interdependencies, limiting the ability to move beyond a categorical description towards a relational model. The proposed working definition for harm contradicts Flanagan's (2008) managerial lens, linking harm to policing's public value. While his approach risks reducing harm to bureaucratic metrics rather than lived experience, conflating criminal-generated harm with harm from insufficient policing, FOI responses frequently referenced reputational harm, illustrating how institutional legitimacy can potentially overshadow victim-centred harm. Although not explicitly addressing harm, this reflects Surrey and Sussex Police's (2024) risk management policy, which systematically outlines the identification, assessment, recording and mitigation of risk to organisational objectives, reputation and financial position, suggesting that T/H/R are also interpreted through an internal, organisational perspective. A more constructive approach might therefore involve distinguishing between two complementary dimensions: an external, victim-centred definition of harm, which foregrounds the physical, psychological, financial and societal consequences to individuals and communities; and an internal, organisational definition of harm, which acknowledges risk to officers' safety, institutional legitimacy and reputational standing.

Risk is the calculable likelihood of exposure to adverse outcomes, graded by probability and temporal orientation (low, medium and high). Drawing on the accumulated findings, the researcher puts forward the following working definition:

> Risk is calculable likelihood of danger of exposure to adverse outcome, arising from actions or events driven by intent or capability and targeting individuals, communities or institutional identities. It is assessed within a state of knowledge, characterised by possibility, uncertainty and the unknown, with risk levels categorised according to the likelihood and/or unpredictability of adverse outcome.

Conceptually, risk can be understood as emerging from the relationship between threat and harm rather than existing as a standalone construct. In this sense, threat provides the potential for harm, harm reflects realised or anticipated impact and risk represents the probabilistic assessment linking the two. However, while this relational interpretation is theoretically intuitive, the reviewed sources do not consistently operationalise T/H/R in a way that explicitly models this triadic interaction. Consequently, the proposed definition reflects how risk is described in practice rather than prescribing a fully integrated framework. Contrary to Flanagan's (2008) residual-risk framing, the current findings suggest that policing emphasises estimating the likelihood that a threat will materialise and cause harm to speculate about the potential likelihood of risk. This current approach aligns with Beck's (1992) concept of anticipated risk, which frames risks as non-existent entities outside the danger themselves: risk emerges only as the outcome of human attempts to foresee and respond to potential threats. In this view, risk is not a tangible phenomenon, but a cognitive construct shaped by anticipation and management strategies. The distinction between risk and danger is therefore crucial. Whereas danger refers to objective threats, risk is a measured, socially and technologically mediated assessment of danger (Beck, 1992). Yet, in practice, risk and danger seem to be frequently conflated. This conflation has important implications: if risk is automatically acted upon once recognised, as Beck suggests, then the notion of 'unmanaged risk' becomes paradoxical. It raises the question of why police resources are invested in assessing risk levels at all, if recognition of risk inevitably triggers intervention.

While the above discussion summarised the findings of this study to formulate the working definition proposed here, it also reveals that these concepts are often, in practice, applied too broadly rather than specifically, reducing their effectiveness and usability, which should be framed as an urgent call for action for the policing community. Much of the material derives from FOI requests tailored to interpersonal offences, including but not limited to violent and sex offences, yet these definitions remain strikingly open-ended. This may be partly explained by operationalisation: frontline staff, whether in person or as call handlers, often do not know what to expect, leaving the terminology deliberately broad to cover a wide range of encounters. However, as the findings identified the breadth undermines the aim of reducing subjectivity, causing officers to continue to rely on 'gut feeling' due to subjective elements in assessing risk, leaving categories 'a bit foggy' and descriptions ambiguously situated between low and high (Hoyle, 2008; Keningale et al., 2025, p. 14; Leach, 2023, p. 73). A recent study employed chain-of-thought prompting methodology to assess ChatGPT (versions 3.5

and 4) in evaluating T/H/R within the context of the NPCC's THRIVE model (Halford & Webster, 2024). The study found that ChatGPT was effective in supporting officers' decision-making, particularly in ethical considerations, suggesting its potential as a tool to promote, rather than replace, human judgment. However, the evaluation of threat showed the lowest performance, attributed to ambiguities and unclear boundaries in the threat definition. Similarly, harm realisation and risk identification, while slightly better, did not score high, indicating challenges in these areas as well (Halfords & Webster, 2024).

This institutional acceptance, without clear definitions of T/H/R, generates dangerous gaps. Officers may interpret situations inconsistently, misjudge dangers or allocate resources ineffectively, broadly aligning with the divergence between call-taker and first-responder T/H/R rating identified by IOPC (2022). By presenting the illusion of precision, T/H/R risks privileging procedural compliance over critical judgment, normalising decisions justified by a framework that remains theoretically immature. Its widespread adoption appears driven more by institutional momentum than conceptual rigour, further highlighting the urgent need for simplification and clarity in policing frameworks.

Operationalisation

The second strand was a structured deductive mixed-method content analysis to establish T/H/R operationalisation. The analysis showed a persistent and troubling absence of standardisation in the operationalisation of T/H/R across English policing. Among the 35 tools identified – from rigid checklists like DASH to looser frameworks such as THRIVE and the NDM or data-driven approaches such as HART – risk and subsequently also threat and harm are defined, assessed and acted upon with striking inconsistency. This variability is often framed as flexibility, enabling officers to respond to the complexities of frontline policing. For example, the FOIs indicate that these tools were ostensibly designed to support decision-making; however, they remain predominantly shaped by subjective judgement. Furthermore, the FOIs reference the Ten Risk Principles (College of Policing, 2013), yet these principles contain contradictory guidance regarding whether decision-making justifications must be formally recorded. Such inconsistency not only leaves scope for subjective interpretation but also undermines the very purpose of establishing standardised T/H/R frameworks. When situated within the broader context of policing's entrenched risk-aversion, extensively documented in both academic and practitioner literature (e.g. Ericson & Haggerty, 1997), the simultaneous application of interrelating tools, such as THRIVE and the NDM, appears less a mechanism for streamlining practice and could in fact be a source of additional procedural complexity and bureaucratic burden. Furthermore, Beck (1992) famously argued that risk is less about objective 'risks' than about managing uncertainty, projecting control and redistributing responsibility.

This tendency runs counter to Flanagan's (2008) assertion that framed T/H/R as a way to ease bureaucratic pressures, yet in practice, they may have served to divert attention from poor performance outcomes, such as low detection rates, towards front-end demand management. Rather than reducing subjectivity, these tools appear to increase administrative burden and constrain officers' professional discretion. Compliance with overlapping frameworks can outweigh responsive, context-sensitive policing, meaning the very mechanisms intended to improve decision-making risk entrenching the bureaucratic culture they were meant to alleviate. This critique finds resonance in Bacon et al. (2025), whose study of 're-professionalisation'[1] in street-level policing, based on 35 interviews and 100 h of observation, demonstrates that compliance pressures often incentivise officers to approach frameworks as 'tick-box' exercises. The result is the production of procedural performance rather than substantive professional engagement. More troublingly, Bacon et al. (2025) establish that attempts to engineer professionalism as a cultural fix for safeguarding, as the T/H/R approach was intended to do (Flanagan, 2008), may actually increase public danger and undermine the police's capacity to reduce T/H/R. Applied to the present findings, this suggests that fragmented and interchangeable T/H/R frameworks may not merely fail to mitigate harm but may in fact generate new vulnerabilities, both for the public and for the officers tasked with protecting them.

Furthermore, what became apparent through the current findings is that police are focusing not necessarily only on crimes occurring in the present but also on those that 'might' occur, that 'could' happen in the future, that may never happen. The policing of risk has increasingly prioritised speculative threats over tangible harms to calculate risk levels, as criticised almost 30 years ago by Ericson and Haggerty (1997). This also aligns tightly with Beck (1992), arguing that '[…] the past loses the power to determine the present. Its place is taken by the future, this, something non-existent, invented, fictive […]' (p. 34), reflecting the concept he calls 'manufactured uncertainty' where different version of risk competes for attention, echoed in the divergent implicit meaning of 'risk' within Soteria Bluestone (Stanko, 2023). The problem, then, is not the consequent evaluation of risk per se, but the overwhelming emphasis on T/H/R that have not yet materialised, at the expense of addressing offences that are already happening/have already happened but are under-recognised (i.e. recognised but not effectively dealt with). Force 7 and Force 17's training materials provide a telling example: 'No threat: burglary of garden shed two days ago with nothing taken'. On the surface, this appears straightforward, yet its interpretation is deeply ambiguous. Does 'no threat' imply that the incident poses no ongoing or future threat to the victim or wider community (because the burglary is completed and unlikely to recur)? Or does it mean that the burglary itself is judged to have posed no inherent threat in the first place, either because no harm was inflicted or because the property targeted is deemed insignificant? The latter would align with Force 6, who differentiate between 'harm' and 'loss/damage'. Nonetheless, this distinction matters profoundly. If the first reading is intended, 'threat' is defined temporally as a question of future risk; if the second, then by the seriousness or significance of the incident itself. However, the example provides no clarification and viewed critically, classifying offences of this nature as 'low risk' or 'no further action needed' does more than simply categorising offences by effectively license their deprioritisation. In practice, such labels can mask the need for meaningful investigations and provide a bureaucratically convenient rational for inaction.

This ambiguity highlights a fundamental problem in the operationalisation of T/H/R. The terms appear to float between different registers (temporal, material, moral) without being anchored in consistent definitions. In practice, this leaves individual officers to impose their own interpretations, opening the door to discretionary variability and inconsistency across forces, aligning with the IOPC (2022) observation. In both cases, the effect is the same: diminished urgency and lower allocation of resources. But the reasoning behind it and therefore the legitimacy of the decision differ radically. That such ambiguity is embedded in training guidance underlines the lack of definitional rigour underpinning T/H/R frameworks. It shows how ostensibly 'standardised' examples can, paradoxically, perpetuate inconsistency, because they fail to specify the conceptual lens through which threat is to be judged.

The lack of standardisation is therefore not an abstract or technical concern. This study shows that it shapes the allocation of resources, the urgency of deployment and ultimately whose safety is prioritised. Despite 43 FOI responses, several forces refused to provide an answer due to either the costs or the absence of recorded definitions and processes were not recorded. This highlights the fragility of the evidential basis upon which current T/H/R decision-making based.

Implications and future research

The findings of this review carry significant implications for both policing practice and future research. At a practical level, the absence of clear and consistent definitions of T/H/R undermines the very purpose of the frameworks that have become central to contemporary policing. Ambiguity not only generates inconsistent decisions across forces but also risks privileging organisational legitimacy over the lived experiences of victims and communities. The multi-dimensional complexity of current T/H/R definitions and operationalisation highlights that these frameworks are not user-friendly. Crucially, this complexity is not only a matter of the number of dimensions included but also the absence of guidance on how these dimensions should be interpreted in relation to one another in practice. Developing standardised, transparent and victim-centred definitions of T/H/R is therefore an urgent priority. Ideally, this should be supported by further research examining subject-specific definitions of T/H/R or providing a comprehensive synthesis, similar to the current research beginning the process for interpersonal offences. Such work should move beyond identifying dimensions in isolation and instead seek to establish how different elements (e.g. intent or capability) interact, combine and influence decision-making outcomes. Without this, decision-making will continue to rely heavily on subjective judgement and 'gut feeling', leaving scope for bias, uneven prioritisation and misallocation of resources. Clearer definitions would also strengthen training, improve resource allocation and enhance accountability, ensuring that T/H/R frameworks operate as tools of professional judgement rather than bureaucratic compliance.

At the same time, the operationalisation of T/H/R demands careful scrutiny. Current tools, such as THRIVE, though intended to support decision-making, appear to have entrenched administrative burdens, stifling officer discretion. Future research should therefore test how these frameworks are actually applied in real-time practice, examining variability across constabularies and policing contexts. Cross-force comparison would help identify whether inconsistent outcomes arise from local culture, training gaps or structural weaknesses in the frameworks themselves. In particular, observational and decision-tracing studies could examine how police officers implicitly combine multiple dimensions of T/H/R under time pressure. Similarly, further conceptual refinement is needed to distinguish between victim-centred and organisational harms and threats to prevent conflations that blur priorities. This would directly address partially the usability problems, highlighted by the current findings, offering a practical pathway to make T/H/R frameworks operationally coherent rather than descriptively expansive.

Emerging technologies also open a new line of inquiry. Early evidence suggests that AI-based tools can support ethical reasoning in assessing T/H/R. However, they remain constrained by the conceptual ambiguities that limit human judgement, including the reproduction of human biases embedded within policing data used to train AI (e.g. see the HART model). Importantly, AI systems also require a structured relationship between variables. The current lack of clarity regarding how T/H/R dimensions interact limits their effectiveness and risks encoding oversimplified decisions. Future research should therefore explore whether digital decision-support systems can be used to promote consistency and transparency without displacing professional discretion. This includes investigating whether computational or probabilistic models can better represent the interaction between T/H/R and whether such models improve decision accuracy. Longitudinal studies are especially important to assess whether clearer definitions and better-designed frameworks translate into improved outcomes, both for victims and for institutional legitimacy.

Limitations

This review is necessarily constrained by the quality and scope of the studies it draws upon. While the overall quality assessment was satisfactory, the conceptual ambiguity surrounding T/H/R made the material difficult to interpret with clarity. In addition, much of the available evidence relates to interpersonal offences, which restricts the generalisability of the findings to other areas of policing, such as cybercrime or organised crime. It is also important to recognise that FOI responses and policy documents may reflect institutional self-presentation rather than actual frontline practice, leaving open the possibility of divergence between official policy and the lived realities of policing.

Conclusion

This review shows that T/H/R has become central to policing discourse yet remains conceptually ill-defined. Though interrelated, the three concepts are deployed differently. Threat functions as a narrative device, often invoked to justify action and oriented towards sources. Harm promises moral clarity but fragments under competing claims of severity, making it outcome-oriented but contested. Risk presents as a scientific calculation yet functions more as a justification for present action than as a prediction of future events; it is likelihood-oriented, concerned with probability. While these distinctions highlight the individual orientations of T/H/R, the review also demonstrates that there is little clarity on how these concepts interact in practice. Rather than operating as discrete categories, T/H/R are likely co-constitutive, with risk emerging from judgements about particular threats that may translate into specific harms. However, this relational dynamic remains largely implicit and underdeveloped within both policy and academic literature. Together, T/H/R inhabit a space between reality and imagination as policing both reflects and constructs the way of their operationalisation. Furthermore, operationalisation does not seem to resolve ambiguity but instead masks it beneath the appearance of procedural clarity. In doing so, they risk embedding arbitrary thresholds of seriousness into practice, leaving space for the reproduction of bias and the uneven prioritisation of T/H/R.

Policing's reliance on T/H/R cannot remain conceptually under-defined. If policing is to benefit from T/H/R frameworks, practice and research must work in tandem by clarifying the meaning of T/H/R, developing models that account for their interaction, testing their application across contexts and evaluating their impact on the fairness and effectiveness of policing decisions.

Note

1. Umbrella term for operational and cultural changes.

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