

Dimensional collapse in UK armed policing threat and risk assessment: How categorical frameworks shape assessment, recording and command communication

Project examining how categorical frameworks shape assessment, recording and command communication in armed policing.

Key details

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Police region	South East
Level of research	PhD
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Research context

Armed policing operations in the UK require commanders to assess both threat and risk before and during operations. Although often used interchangeably, these concepts are distinct: threat concerns the capability and intent to cause harm, while risk concerns the likelihood and consequences of harm in context (Strachan-Morris 2012). Under current [Authorised Professional Practice \(APP\)](#), commanders translate these judgements into categorical outputs such as high, medium, low or unknown. These categories inform command decisions, resource deployment and the audit trail available for later scrutiny.

The Jermaine Baker Public Inquiry criticised Metropolitan Police firearms commanders for producing static assessments that did not evolve with circumstances (Goldstone 2022), and the Southport Inquiry (Home Office 2026) identified failures to integrate escalating risk indicators. A pilot study with twelve firearms commanders from a large English force found repeated conflation of threat and risk, divergence in how command levels weighted likelihood and consequence, compression of judgements into broad defensive categories, and difficulty representing change over time. These patterns were described collectively as 'dimensional collapse': the compression of continuous, multidimensional and time-sensitive judgements into categorical labels that obscure important operational variation (Price 2026). Critiques of risk matrices identify similar problems of range compression and loss of resolution (Cox 2008, Hubbard and Evans 2010). Two recent peer-reviewed studies (Halford 2026 and Bielak and others 2026) have independently identified inconsistency in threat and risk frameworks across forces and called for further research into specific areas of policing.

The aim of this study is to examine how UK firearms commanders distinguish, weight and record threat and risk, and how the categorical structure of current frameworks shapes the working strategies, command communication and resource prioritisation that flow from those assessments. The objectives are to:

- examine how commanders at strategic, tactical and operational levels understand and distinguish threat and risk
- how they weight likelihood and consequence
- what information is preserved or lost in categorical recording
- whether those outputs adequately support command purposes

Research methodology

The study will adopt a qualitative multi-method design informed by an interpretivist epistemology and a pragmatic orientation. An interpretivist position is appropriate because the research is concerned with how commanders understand, translate and record threat and risk, and how those processes are shaped by role and organisational context (Crotty 1998). A pragmatic orientation is also adopted because the study seeks findings of direct operational, training and policy value (Feilzer 2010, Morgan, 2007).

The first component comprises scenario-based semi-structured interviews with accredited firearms commanders at strategic and tactical levels. Each interview will lead the participant through a structured, evolving armed policing scenario, with information released in stages to reflect the conditions under which assessments are formed operationally. At defined points, participants will be asked to record their threat and risk assessments in the categorical formats they would normally use and to explain the reasoning behind them. This approach reflects the naturalistic decision-making tradition, in which judgement is examined as it develops under realistic conditions rather than reconstructed retrospectively (Klein 2017, Lipshitz and others 2001). It allows direct examination of how multidimensional judgement is translated into categorical outputs and of what is preserved or lost in that translation.

The second component is a qualitative questionnaire distributed to a wider population of firearms commanders. Built around the same scenario material, it will capture categorical assessments, dimensional weightings and written rationales from commanders in contrasting force contexts, extending the empirical base beyond those available for interview.

Sampling will be purposive and criterion-based, recruiting commanders holding current or recent command accreditation. Access will be negotiated with individual forces through their research governance arrangements, with participation voluntary.

Both datasets will be analysed using Framework Analysis (Ritchie and Spencer 1994), which accommodates a priori and emergent themes and supports transparent cross-case comparison.

Research participation

The study builds on a completed pilot project undertaken within the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), for which University of Portsmouth and MPS ethical approval was held. The pilot comprised interviews with twelve MPS firearms commanders accredited at strategic, tactical and operational levels. It found repeated conflation of threat and risk, variable understanding of key concepts, divergence in how different command levels weighted likelihood and consequence, concentration of assessments into broad defensive categories and difficulty representing change over time within static recording formats – patterns described collectively as 'dimensional collapse' (Price 2026).

The doctoral study extends this work beyond a single force. A number of chief officers in forces across the UK have been contacted to invite their force's participation, and access will be confirmed

through each participating force's research governance arrangements.

Two groups of participants will be recruited, in both cases on a voluntary basis. For the scenario-based semi-structured interviews, volunteers will be sought from commanders accredited as Specialist Strategic Firearms Commanders (SFCs) and Specialist Tactical Firearms Commanders (TFCs). For the questionnaire, volunteers will be sought from the wider cadre of accredited SFCs and TFCs across participating forces, enabling comparison of how commanders in contrasting force contexts assess and categorise identical scenario material. Operational Firearms Commanders (OFCs) are not included in the current design, although the scope may be reviewed as the study develops.

Participation will be voluntary throughout, with no organisational obligation to take part. Commanders for whom the researcher holds any line management, assessment or command responsibility will not be recruited. All participants will receive full written information before consent is sought, and all data will be anonymised so that no individual, force or operation can be identified in the thesis or any subsequent output.

References

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