This paper presents findings from an ethnography of call handlers and dispatchers in a police force control room in England (Lumsden and Black 2017). While emergency communication has been widely studied by conversation analysts there has been scarce work in sociology and criminology on force control rooms. Exceptions include Manning’s (1988) classic study which focuses on the interpretive work involved in the police channelling of calls into symbolic forms (see also Ekblom and Heal 1982; White 2014). The study focused on the role of civilians in police organizations in the context of austerity and increased demand, and the role of police in responding to a variety of incidents.

We found that although there was recognition by staff of the range of social welfare incidents which police face on a daily basis, and while they spend relatively little time responding to criminal incidents, there was still an element of traditional police culture present where staff saw their role as assisting officers to catch offenders (Loftus 2010). Austerity policing impacted on their definitions of what was deemed to be ‘real’ police work, and reaffirmed traditional aspects of police culture. The financial crisis also increased dissonance concerning the role and function of policing at the frontline, and the relationship of policing to other agencies (such as social work).

Previous studies of emergency control rooms have highlighted the ‘public-facing’ nature of this work as opposed to the ‘customer-facing’ orientation of corporate call centre work (Tracy and Tracy 1998), which has implications for the emotional labour engaged in by employees. Our study highlighted a blurring between the ‘public-facing’ and ‘customer-facing’ orientation of call centre work. Staff in this control room had to adopt a customer-service framework in many elements of frontline work in order to meet public (and political) expectations. This shift in organizational alignment from ‘public-facing’ to also ‘customer-facing’ (and from police force to police service) has implications for the handling of calls, the management of workers’ emotions, and their wellbeing.