

The Lesbians and Policing Project: Police monitoring in defence of dangerous lesbian-ness in 1980s London

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Abstract

This article provides a case study of *The Lesbians and Policing Project* [LesPop], a police monitoring organisation that existed in London between 1984 and 1990. Drawing on archives held at Glasgow Women's Library, the article reviews the activities of LesPop and outlines its aims and objectives. We consider both its origins and its demise in the political context of Britain in the 1980s. In doing so, we argue that LesPop offers an important, and hitherto unexamined, contribution to lesbian history in Britain. Centralising the experiences of lesbians in London in an era of state-sanctioned homophobia, LesPop provides a case study in lesbian political and community organising and engagement with, or resistance to, the carceral state. Understanding how LesPop sought to monitor and research the police and in turn, educate and organise lesbians, reveals much about the regulation of sexuality in the pursuit of social order

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and illustrates the importance then, and now, of grassroots efforts to challenge homophobia and hold the police to account.

Keywords: policing, police monitoring, LGBTQ, lesbian history.

Introduction

This article provides a case study of *The Lesbians and Policing Project* [LesPop], a police monitoring organisation, that existed in London between 1984 and 1990. Drawing on archives held at Glasgow Women's Library [GWL], the article outlines the organisation's aims, objectives, and activities and considers them in their historical context. In doing so, we argue that LesPop provides an important insight into the experiences of lesbians in London in the 1980s, a period in British history that has been described as a 'decade of state-sanctioned homophobia' (Peter Tatchell Foundation, 2012). LesPop offers an important, and hitherto unexamined, contribution to lesbian history in Britain, centralising the existence of both homophobic policing and lesbian resistance to it. Understanding how LesPop sought to monitor and research the police, and in turn, educate and organise lesbians, reveals much about both the nature of the police approach to queer communities in the 1980s, and the place of police monitoring in the history of queer, and specifically lesbian, activism. In an era in which the Metropolitan Police, Britain's largest force, has been found to still be 'institutionally homophobic' (Casey, 2023) activists working today may be able to learn from the strategies employed and challenges faced by LesPop.

Homophobia in London in the 1980s

The 1980s in Britain was a period of profound political and cultural change. The 'great moving right show' highlighted by Stuart Hall (1979) at the end of the 1970s played out under the political dominance of the Conservative administrations of Margaret Thatcher elected in 1979, 1983, and 1987. Culturally, the project of Thatcherism was defined by a form of 'regressive modernization' (Hall 1988: 2), through which the state sought to undo the 'permissive claptrap' of the 1960s (Thatcher in Weeks 2002: 18) and usher in a 'return' to moral values. The project of moral reform involved a 'reassertion of what were conceived of as traditional familial and sexual standards' (Weeks 2012: 375) and positioned homosexuality as a primary concern. As Stephen Brooke has argued recently, 'the 1980s saw a counter-reaction to the progress of gay

rights, seen in policing, the media, and the policies of the Conservative government' (Brooke, 2024: 142).

Identifying homosexuality as a central problem in the supposed moral decline of British society meant that LGBTQ+ people were positioned alongside other subaltern communities as an 'enemy within'. This status was reflective of Thatcherism's 'constant attempts to expel symbolically one sector of society after another from the imaginary community of the nation' (Hall, 1988, p.8). This intensified a climate of homophobia in which public disapproval of homosexuality increased from 62% of the population in 1983 to 74% in 1987 (Wall 2023: 23). This was fuelled by media depictions of LGBTQ+ life, and in particular the AIDs panic (Cook 2016), but also by government policy which culminated in the passing of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. Section, or Clause, 28 ruled that local councils could not 'intentionally promote homosexuality' and legitimated 'the abandonment of lesbian and gay issues by local authorities' (Smith, 1992: 202).

The centrality of a 'law-and-order' agenda to Thatcher's programme of national renewal meant that the police were vital to its success. In a reciprocal arrangement, Thatcher called for increased pay and police powers, while Chief Constables and the Police Federation, representing the rank and file, gave speeches about the growth of crime and disorder that was seen to be a result of the permissiveness encouraged under previous Labour governments (Reiner 2008). The police were thus at the heart of attempts to defeat the enemies within (Reiner 2010) and this was reflected in the policing of groups including trade unions (Milne 1994), black communities (Institute of Race Relations 1987), immigrants (Solomos, 2003), and LGBTQ+ people (Galloway, 1983; Wilton 1995).

Through the 1980s the police publicly lobbied to 'retain or intensify legislation that discriminated against lesbians and gay men' (GLC Gay Working Party, 1985; Galloway, 1983), but their role was most clearly revealed in their direct dealings with the gay and lesbian community. As Galop, the Gay London Police Monitoring Group, saw it at the time, 'the struggle of the gay and lesbian community against the police was an intrinsic element of a period of 'open warfare between the police and subaltern communities'' (cited in Brookes, 2024: 146). The role of the police in regulating queerness in Britain has been most obvious in response to gay men due to the historic criminalisation of same-sex sex and the policing of public sex (Galloway, 1983), but there is a need to understand how the exercise of police power has also served to regulate lesbian lives and sexualities. The role of the British state in

regulating lesbian lives – as mothers, tenants, workers, patients – has been examined (for example, Wilton, 1995) but the role of police has arguably been underplayed. This gap is reflected in the disciplines of criminology and police studies who have historically ignored both women’s experiences (Authors, 2023) and the experiences of LGBTQ+ communities (Woods, 2014).

LesPop has therefore an important place in the study of lesbian history, specifically in developing our understanding of lesbian experience of homophobic policing and lesbian resistance to it in London. The story of LesPop is a story of lesbian activism in a period of state-sponsored homophobia and in a city that has been central to the queer history of Britain (Avery and Graham, 2018; Houlbrook, 2005). But LesPop also complicates the image of lesbian conflict and engagement with the state in this period, with its creation and demise both determined by changing dynamics in local authorities. The work of the organisation was noted by some studies of women’s experiences in the 1980s (see for example, Natzler, 1989; Wilton, 1995; Chadwick and Little, 1987) and has been mentioned in some recent work (Brooke, 2024; Downes, 2020) but the significance of LesPop, and the place of police, and police monitoring, have been underexplored in lesbian histories in Britain.

Methodology

This archival research is based on holdings at GWL. The LesPop collection (GB1534 LP) contains a range of different sources, including information bulletins, publicity leaflets, information cards, posters, briefing papers, and annual reports, spanning the years 1984-1990. It is this sense of collective information – a constellation of texts which taken together represent the work of LesPop and can communicate the breadth and power of their work – which is important for archival methodology. These texts represent forms of social discourse; textual representations of the inner workings of how specific things were organised across a specific time period (Ventresca and Mohr, 2017). Written and visual texts are therefore popular forms of data to analyse given their ability to codify what was said, thought, and had meaning at points in recent history (Smith, 1984 in Ventresca and Mohr, 2017: 806).

The research team gathered the data across two different visits to GWL. The first, a scoping exercise, the second, where we spent longer with the materials, taking photos, making notes, and familiarising ourselves with the textual and aesthetic content, nature, and form of the LesPop materials. We then printed out the materials to obtain hard copies and spent several months reading and discussing the documents, coding them, and preparing them for thematic

analysis. These were supplemented by other publicly available documents produced by related organisations in the same period to contextualise the LesPop data.

Whilst the interpretation process was offset by exploring and understanding as much as we could about the contextual social, political, and temporal features of the time, for the purposes of this article, the data is largely descriptive and enables us to translate what we understand LesPop's aims, activities, and focus to be. Importantly, the data we collected gave a rich and vibrant picture of the operational, political, financial, and experiential nature of LesPop across several years. It helps therefore to shape *our* understanding of why we see this organisation and its work as significant, and what we think *we* can learn from LesPop in relation to the policing of lesbians and the regulation of lesbian lives (Moore et al., 2017).

The establishment of LesPop

LesPop was founded in 1984 as an offshoot of Galop (Galop, 1985). Galop itself had been set up in 1982 via funding from the Labour-led Greater London Council [GLC] which had supported the development of Policing Monitoring Groups to provide alternative mechanisms of holding the Metropolitan Police accountable (Galop, 1984). From its establishment, Galop had been mainly concerned with the experiences of gay men in London, but additional GLC funding in 1984 enabled the appointment of a lesbian worker to conduct a three-month pilot project starting in May of that year (Galop, 1985). This pilot project, entitled The Lesbians and Policing Project, ran beyond its initial timeframe, enjoying autonomy under Galop until independent funding was granted by the GLC in February 1985 (GLC Police Committee Support Unit, 1985). This enabled LesPop to set up as a separate organisation with 'full responsibility for researching into and educating lesbians about issues to do with Lesbians and the police in London' (LesPop 1986: 1).

Early work by LesPop was organised into two areas: 'research into legislation and police policies, practice, and tactics in London and how these affect lesbians; and the education of lesbians in London about policing issues' (GLC Police Committee Support Unit, 1985: 5). The project was established, in its pilot phase, because 'virtually nothing had been said or done in relation to the policing of lesbians' (LesPop 1985a: 1). The lack of attention was not reflective of a lack of problems; there was 'widespread dissatisfaction with the police, their policies and practices, and a need to educate lesbians in London about various aspects of policing as they affect our lives' (LesPop 1985c: 1). As noted above, Galop's existence from 1982 did not constitute a sufficient response to the experience of lesbians as it was largely concerned with

the experiences of gay men, failing to reflect the fact that, in the view of LesPop, ‘the needs/demands/problems of lesbians to do with the police were vastly different from those of gay men’ (LesPop 1985c: 1).

LesPop was established with one full time post offered as a job-share from September 1984. Following the receipt of independent funding, this was expanded to two full time lesbian workers – one Black and one Shephardi Jewish (Black and Mogen, 1985) – assisted by a small unpaid collective that was comprised of lesbians from ‘a variety of backgrounds, but all...under 30 and without children’ (LesPop 1985c: 1). The original worker who led the pilot project, Margie Wood, explained her aspirations for the project in an Interim Report published in July 1984:

I am very concerned that LesPop doesn’t turn out like a lot of “community-based” groups, feeding off the struggles of the community and contributing nothing & I see its role as helping lesbian self-organisation (LesPop 1985c: 2).

LesPop’s Aims and Objectives

By 1985, LesPop had a clear set of Aims and Objectives (LesPop, 1985a) that centralised its emphases on consciousness raising and the defence of lesbians from the discriminatory exercise of police power. The first of the Aims and Objectives is particularly reflective of the central thrusts of the organisation’s work and focus:

1. To research and monitor the treatment of lesbians by the police, including lesbians which crimes have been committed against. To investigate the different ways lesbians are treated by the police according to their race, cultural or ethnic background, age, motherhood status, or physical or mental abilities (LesPop, 1985a: 1).

This is the first of 12 aims, and it is revealing that it combines both a central emphasis on research and monitoring with a focus on the need to consider different experiences within lesbian communities. The inseparability of these two dynamics to LesPop’s work is reflected in the wider activities of the organisation.

The other aims and objectives [AOs] set out LesPop’s remit regarding researching and monitoring both the under-policing of lesbians as victims of crime [AO2], and the undermining of their rights when engaged as suspects [AO4]. The organisation aimed to monitor police conduct throughout the entire process from allegation through to trial [AO5] and to record and collate statistics on the activities of police [AO3]. LesPop sought to research and monitor

official complaints made against the police by lesbians [AO6] and monitor police public statements on lesbianism and violence against women [AO7]. The casework carried out by the organisation (discussed below) was supported by interviews and record keeping [AO8]. There was a commitment to produce leaflets and hold workshops [AO9], to write, print and distribute articles, reports, newsletters [AO11], and to publish the results of any research carried out [AO10]. The final item on the list was a requirement for all members to ‘pay one pound if LesPop ceases to exist’ [AO12] (LesPop, 1985a). These aims remained consistent throughout the life of the project and are reflective in later documents and in accounts of the work of the organisation.

Areas of focus

During the first year of operation, LesPop received reports from lesbians that evidenced ‘a widespread dissatisfaction with the police in London’ (GLC Police Committee Support Unit, 1985: 5). LesPop published a Mission Statement in 1985 (Black and Mogen, 1985) that detailed an enduring emphasis on two key areas: publicity for the project and educational and research work. The research work sought to develop the evidence base on lesbian experiences of policing in London and did so by focussing on three main areas in which police anti-lesbianism was apparent: firstly, for lesbians who find themselves targets of ‘police activity, investigation and harassment’ when reporting as victims of crime; secondly, for lesbians who are stopped/arrested/questioned about offences unrelated to matters of sexuality but subsequently find that ‘their lesbianism becomes the major issue’ (Black and Mogen, 1985: 1); and thirdly, for lesbians stopped/arrested/harassed directly for being lesbians.

The earliest interim report on LesPop activities suggested that the policing of lesbians evident in the 1980s was not new but was intensifying. The author, Wood (1984: 2), suggested that ‘information-gathering on lesbians is a growth industry within the Met’. The idea that conditions for lesbians in London were deteriorating was also reiterated in later materials that highlighted the impact of new legislation on lesbians in London, including Section 28 and the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 [PACE]. The notion that lesbians had distinct experiences of policing from both gay men and heterosexual women, was central to the founding story told in multiple LesPop documents and in later appeals for funding. While Wood argued that lesbians had distinct experiences of policing that warranted a specific lesbian-led police monitoring organisation, she did acknowledge that lesbians often find it hard to

determine if police harassment ‘stems from their belief that the wimmin involved are lesbians, or from simple good old-fashioned hostility toward wimmin in general’ (1984: 2).

Case study examples were provided in some documents (LesPop 1985c,1988) to illustrate the nature of police interaction with lesbians. In some of these (1985c) lesbians were subject to discrimination and abuse because their lesbianism is made explicit to police through where they were, what they said, or what they did. In others (1985c and 1988) lesbians experienced negative police responses, primarily due to being victims of men’s violence, in line with that experienced by heterosexual women in this period (see, Hamner et al 1989). While LesPop centralise the experience of lesbians, the case studies suggest that lesbians experienced negative police interactions varying due to their sexuality and/or their gender. As other observers of the time recognised, ‘the oppressive policing of lesbians should not just be seen in the context of anti-feminism; it is also part of a vicious campaign against gay men’ (Natzler 1989: 159; see also GLC Gay Working Party, 1985). It is likely therefore that lesbians who were read as disorderly by police were explicitly positioned at the intersection of gender and sexuality oppressions. The LesPop materials repeatedly stress that the intersection of police anti-feminism and homophobia meant that lesbian experiences were distinct. Some of the issues highlighted and targeted by LesPop stemmed from misogynistic or more generally homophobic policing, but their materials and activities sought to highlight the ways that these did combine for many women in a specific police *anti-lesbianism*. Furthermore, as outlined later in this article, LesPop understood the specificities of experience through an intersectional lens and much of their organising was based around adequately addressing the distinct needs of lesbian women at the point where power dynamics of gender, sexuality, race, class and disability collide.

Early research work identified a set of key issues that guided the work of the organisation. The first of these was the development of ‘multi-agency policing’ which served to formalise existing practices, whereby social services, voluntary groups, local councils, and others supplied information to the police. In a political climate in which to be gay or lesbian was still to be seen as deviant by much of the public, the media, and many public institutions, this had particular implications for lesbians who had ‘something to lose’ such as ‘lesbians with children or those under threat of deportation’ (Black and Mogen, 1985: 1). Police discrimination against lesbian mothers was highlighted as one notable dynamic of police anti-lesbianism that differentiated the experience of some lesbians from that of gay men and heterosexual women.

Lesbian mothers did have much to lose in a climate in which lesbians were seen to be ‘harmful to children’ (GLC Gay Working Party, 1985: 30) and this was reflected in the account of ‘multi-agency policing’ provided by LesPop. The second key issue was the development of police technology, specifically the use of computers which enhanced practices of surveillance and information gathering. This was understood to be intensifying and facilitated by advancements in cameras, phone-tapping and new equipment to enhance the monitoring of cultural events and demonstrations.

The third key area of concern identified through early LesPop research was ‘the reorganisation of the police force’. The Met police underwent significant reform in the mid-1980s and the establishment of ‘3 holding and training centres in London’ (Black and Mogen 1985: 2) was juxtaposed with the role that the Met had played during the miners’ strike (1984-1985). For LesPop, this was reflective of a militarisation of policing aimed at quelling dissent and unrest in a ‘time of misery, unemployment, racist attacks and violence against women’ (Black and Mogen, 1985: 2). LesPop sought from the outset to frame the policing of lesbians in a political context and see it as part of more general changes in the role and nature of policing. This was stated explicitly in the Mission Statement published in 1985:

The project believes that the escalation in police harassment, intimidation and violence towards certain groups does not happen in a vacuum. England is moving to the right, and this is demonstrated by a rise in pornography, racist attacks, media woman-hatred, racism and collusion with repressive forces and the passing of blatantly repressive laws such as the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (Black and Mogen 1985: 2).

The emphasis on PACE was key to LesPop’s work. PACE was the subject of posters, leaflets, briefing papers, and workshops as it introduced sweeping changes to police powers. LesPop’s reading of the act, and new powers it introduced, was that it was primarily repressive, serving to ‘merely legitimise police activity – it gives the police the legal powers to enact their opinions, prejudices and discrimination’ (LesPop 1985b: 10). The concern with the reorganisation of police was reflective of major changes to police powers and relevant legislation in this period including PACE, The Public Order Act 1986 and the Prevention of Terrorism Act 1984 which were all focal points in LesPop’s activities and materials and key to the argument that conditions in London were worsening for lesbians.

The final core concern of the organisation, which defined much of its work and its approach to policing generally, was the experiences of ‘specific groups’ (Black and Mogen, 1985: 2). Here

the group centralised an intersectional approach that recognised that ‘certain groups of lesbians encounter certain forms of maltreatment by the police all of which may intersect with police anti-lesbianism’ (Black and Mogen, 1985: 2). In early publications, LesPop sought firstly to highlight the specific experiences of Black lesbians, Irish lesbians, and lesbians from ‘ethnic minorities’ that result from police racism and the criminalisation of minoritized communities. The need to understand differential experiences, and to reflect them in the organisation’s activities was stressed throughout the LesPop materials. There was great emphasis placed on the fact that lesbians from minoritised communities are affected by the intersection of police anti-lesbianism and the well documented police racism of the 1980s (see Institute for Race Relations, 1987). The position taken on the enhanced discrimination experienced by black lesbians was based on findings from casework (LesPop, 1985e) but no further detail or case study examples on this are provided in the documents accessed at GWL.

Secondly, LesPop’s research and activities on differentially situated groups identified issues experienced by lesbians with disabilities. These related to the failure to accommodate disabilities in police custody and the enhanced suspicion directed at lesbians with disabilities which can lead to them being accused of being under the influence of drink or drugs. The desire to take an intersectional approach was highlighted in the recognition that the negative experiences of disabled lesbians are further worsened by racism as black and Irish people were more likely to be suspected of using drugs or being drunk by police. Alongside race and disability, the early research also highlighted the experiences of young lesbians who were more vulnerable to police intimidation, harassment, or coercion when they had not yet come out, and lesbians mothers whose custody of children could be compromised by police and other agencies making their sexual orientation public (Black and Mogen, 1985: 2).

Defending lesbians from the police

The combined focus on publicity for the project and the need to educate lesbians about policing gave rise to a programme of activities and the production of a range of materials to be distributed through London. The development of materials and a programme of public workshops was an early priority driven by an assessment of the information gaps among the lesbian community and changes in policing in London:

There is an obvious need for information about what the police are doing, changes and developments in policing policies, practices and legislation, as well as basic

information about rights, what to expect in the case of a police raid, how to prepare for demonstrations, and so on (Black and Mogen 1985: 3).

The approach taken was described in later documentation as ‘a co-educative process’ (LesPop, 1988a: 8) and at its core, the project sought to make clear to lesbians the political role the police played and the impact this had on the police view of all lesbians, warning readers: ‘It is the boys in blue with the power to decide who is a decent citizen and who is not. You aren’t’ (LesPop. 1985d: 12).

LesPop produced leaflets on their work and distributed these through clubs, bars, women’s centres, lesbian organised events, demonstrations, student unions and other places. Leaflets included titles such as: ‘Lesbians Do you know...?’, ‘Public Order – an issue of concern for lesbians’, ‘Black Lesbians and the Police’, ‘The Lesbians and Policing Project – what is it’, and ‘Women – What the Police Act Means for Us’ (LesPop, 1988a: 12). They also produced posters on civil rights issues and a civil rights card to be carried in case of arrest or stop and search, and produced a regular bulletin about the project and the key issues it was working on (Black and Mogen, 1985). To make the materials as accessible as possible, LesPop sought to provide all materials on tape as well as to produce them in translation (LesPop, 1988a: 12). This is reflected in the archive where some materials are reproduced in languages including Arabic, Chinese, Turkish, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati and Bengali. They wrote letters to, and met with, other groups and organisations to publicise their work, published articles in autonomous, feminist publications such as the London Women’s Liberations Newsletter and the Black Feminist Newsletter.

The programme of public workshops began early in the life of the organisation and continued through to its end. These were held in places including women’s centres, bookshops, and community centres and addressed general issues with policing as well as specific topics such as ‘Police Raids’, ‘Your Rights on Arrest’, and ‘The Implications of the Police Act’ (Black and Mogen, 1985: 3). The programme was intensive, with the organisation delivering over 100 workshops in the first two years of operation (LesPop, 1986: 4) and over 100 in 1988 alone (LesPop, 1988a: 9). These were open to the public and made as accessible as possible to increase public engagement, but some workshops were put on for specific communities with a particular focus on Black lesbians ‘out of respect for the(ir) autonomy’ (Black and Mogen 1985: 3). Workshops were also addressed to lesbian mothers, and ‘groups working with lesbians working as prostitutes’ (ibid).

From May 1985, LesPop ran a weekly 'Phone-in' available to 'all women who wish to use it' (LesPop, 1986: 2) and many women who were not lesbians contacted LesPop via this means as there was 'a lack of service in terms of legal advice for all women in London' (ibid). This was supplemented by a weekly drop-in and a 24 hour 'ansaphone' which directed women to the Gay Switchboard where they could get information on sympathetic solicitors who could offer advice on an emergency basis. LesPop (1988a) conducted a survey of solicitors in London to produce a list of experienced and sympathetic solicitors to whom LesPop could refer clients.

Women approached LesPop for a variety of reasons requesting different forms of assistance and advice. Staff undertook a variety of casework, prompted by women contacting them directly or via referrals from women's centres in London. This work involved supporting women who had no other options for advice, guidance, and support. Supporting women through the court process and liaising with solicitors was key to this, but LesPop also noted that support was still needed where cases didn't make it to court. The organisation regularly dealt with women who were arrested 'for reasons that frequently have not enough substance to them, and the charges have to be dropped' (LesPop, 1988a: 11). This was understood to be a result of police using arrest powers to harass or intimidate women rather than in response to criminal offences (LesPop, 1986: 14).

LesPop provided stewards and legal observers for a wide range of demonstrations in London on LGBTQ+ issues such as Gay Pride and Lesbian Strength marches, as well as feminist protests such as Reclaim the Night, Violence Against Women pickets, Women Against Deportations, International Women's Day, and at other events including anti-apartheid protests, pickets of police stations, and Troops out of Northern Ireland marches (LesPop, 1986: 13). LesPop staff also provided a liaison role in mediating between the organisers of demonstrations and the police both in advance of and during events. This involved negotiation to determine the routes of demonstrations, the number of participants, and provision for those with disabilities (LesPop, 1988b:14). This role served to help facilitate demonstrations and to diffuse confrontational situations (ibid).

While LesPop worked with a range of organisations, its membership rules demonstrate limits to its collaborations and expose something of the political ethos that underpinned its work. The membership rules state that 'membership is not open to members or associates of Wages for Housework, the English Collective of Prostitutes, Wages Due Lesbians, Women against Rape, Black Women for Wages for Housework' (LesPop, 1985a: 2). While there is no further

information on this rule or on conflicts with other groups in the archive materials held at GWL, LesPop's barring of these organisations might tell us something about the political positioning of the organisation and its place in the lesbian 'sex wars' (Healey 1996; Jefferys, 2018) of the 1980s. Wages for Housework (W4H), a feminist group founded in 1975, spawned various organisations, including the others listed in the LesPop rules (Mackay 2015), and was active in debates in lesbian circles in London in this period around questions of lesbian sexuality, sexual pleasure, sexual violence, and sex-work. From the opposing side, W4H sought, through its engagement in women's issues, to 'subvert feminist perspectives' (Jeffreys 2018: 123). Their position on sadomasochism [SM] – a central flashpoint in the sex wars – led to them, and other pro-SM lesbians, being banned from queer and feminist spaces in London (Healey 1996; Jefferys 2018) including those in which LesPop operated. While these conflicts were kept out of the public materials LesPop produced, the membership rules do provide an insight into their positioning in the sex wars and the type of lesbian feminism that shaped their activism.

The demise of LesPop

LesPop's activities were affected by the turbulent political climate in which it operated. In 1986, the Thatcher government abolished the GLC in response to the radical agenda that it had developed, particularly under the leadership of Ken Livingstone (White, 2008). The support that the GLC provided for LGBTQ+ rights and organisations was a focal point of the political and media criticism that led to its abolition (Brooke, 2024; Smith, 1992). Like many other organisations, including Galop, LesPop's funding was interrupted by the abolition of the GLC, and this led to it being reliant on appeals to the London Borough Grant Scheme [LBGS] (LesPop, 1988a: 7) that was less forthcoming in its funding for LGBTQ+ organisations. Galop was twice refused funding (Galop, 1987) and LesPop's first request for funding was only granted on appeal. The project secured funding to continue in 1988 (LesPop, 1988b) but this was refused in 1989 as LesPop was by then considered to be a "low priority" group by the LBGS (LesPop, 1989: 1). By March 1989, the lack of available funding meant that activities and services had been cut to a minimum (ibid). Independent fundraising was attempted but by 1990 LesPop could no longer sustain itself and was reintegrated into Galop.

The decline in available funding to LesPop from 1988 was in no small part down to the passing of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. Galop argued that the clause led to 'incipient self-censorship' by some councils who refused to fund lesbian and gay projects (Galop, 1989: 1). Having been born out of the radical experiment in local government in the Labour controlled

GLC, LesPop's demise was a result of the withdrawal of local funding consciously initiated by the Thatcher administration at national level. The collapse of a radical queer organisation like LesPop, which challenged the legitimacy of both the carceral state and central government policy, had been an explicit intention of Section 28. For its brief existence, LesPop sat in the centre of the conflict between the New Right in national government and the radical Labour left in local government. It was reliant on funding from one part of the state and yet ranged against another. The relationship between radical queer activism of this type and the state was complicated in this specific historical and geographic context, even if its predominant experience was of the repressive force of the New Right and its mobilisation of the carceral state.

Conclusion: In defence of dangerous lesbian-ness

The LesPop materials held at GWL provide evidence of the significance of the organisation to the history of the policing of LGBTQ+ people in Britain. Our aim here is to begin the process of examining LesPop as a form of community resistance to the policing of queerness. Drawing on our previous work on the policing of disorderly women (Authors, 2019), we want to suggest that LesPop demonstrates how lesbians have been policed as a threat to social order. More specifically, a study of LesPop illustrates how the exercise of police power has served to (re)produce which forms of lesbian-ness have been marked as dangerous.

LesPop was established in response to a clear need for monitoring of the policing of lesbians in London in the early 1980s. In line with the principles of police monitoring, and established practice in London under the GLC's Police Committee Support Unit, the type of work that LesPop did was aimed at reducing violence and discrimination, and holding police to account, by exposing the homophobia that underpinned the over-policing of lesbians as suspects and the under-policing of them as victims. The project was a response to, and ultimately a victim of, the rising tide of state-sanctioned homophobia under Thatcher.

Out of necessity, the response to the policing of lesbians was centrally concerned with the protection of bodies and physical spaces in London. LesPop was an important part of this resistance, and it mounted its response from a perspective that recognised that, while lesbians were at risk for the same reasons as all women and other members of the LGBTQ+ community, their experience was distinct, and thus the form of resistance also had to be distinct. The history of LesPop shows us that the power of the government of the day to control access to funding,

and to constrain the ability of more sympathetic parts of the state to support LGBTQ+ rights, was sufficient to overcome the resistance LesPop mounted independently.

In Anna Marie Smith's (1992) reading of section 28 she identified that it had a *productive* role in promoting a differentiation between acceptable and unacceptable forms of queerness in the lesbian and gay community. For Smith, the prohibitions introduced by section 28 'constructed an opposition between the responsible homosexual and dangerous gayness' (1992: 202). Those forms of queerness that challenged the social order were subjected to enhanced social and legal regulation and the responsible, acceptable homosexual was (re)defined as someone who 'limits his or her expression of his or her homosexuality to a hidden and self-contained space' (Smith, 1992: 204). As Emma Healey (1996: 166) argued, section 28 'bullied lesbians and gay men into censoring themselves'. We want to suggest that this reading helps us to understand not only the productive effects of section 28 but also the policing of queer bodies and queer spaces in London in the 1980s.

The policing of lesbians that LesPop researched, documented, and challenged was directed at regulating public queerness. In addition, the fact that LesPop placed such emphasis on working with, and defending, specific groups including Black lesbians and lesbian mothers, reflects the fact that in the eyes of the police, they constituted the most dangerous forms of lesbian-ness (Smith, 1992: 208). The figure of the black lesbian was highlighted by the New Right, including the Thatcher government, as representative of the preoccupations of the "looney left" (Smith, 1992: 208). Defending the black lesbian was represented as progressive politics 'gone mad', pushed to its extreme, given the supposedly unrealistic demands made by her, or on her behalf. The lesbian mother stood as perhaps the most explicit challenge to a patriarchal social order. To be out and in public was sufficient to be viewed as a threat, but to be lesbian and a mother was to explicitly reject the social order and men's place in it. The policing lesbians experienced in London (and elsewhere) needs to be understood as reflective of the police's role in the 'fabrication of social order' (Neocleous, 2000) in which disorderly elements in society must be tackled and (re)ordered. The nature of the policing of lesbians, and in particular marginalised groups within the lesbian community, exposed by LesPop is reflective the fact that these groups were long designated as 'police property' (Lee, 1981), a categorisation reflective of disproportionate police targeting conducted with relative impunity.

LesPop's work reinforces the view that the regulation of queerness has always included lesbians, but also illustrates that the institution of police, and the exercise of police power, have

been central to this process via the attempted pacification of dangerous lesbian-ness. Positioning LGBTQ+ people as an enemy within in the 1980s meant that they were subject to discriminatory policing in line with that experienced by other groups also identified in this way. Homophobic policing was green-lit by the Thatcher government's discourse and policy on LGBTQ+ life. LesPop's political positioning vis-a-vis the carceral state, and its explicit rejection of state-sanctioned homophobia, made clear which side of a divide between acceptable and unacceptable queerness it was located on. By challenging the legitimacy of the police, LesPop sought to undermine one of the key institutions that the Thatcher government relied upon to enforce its political hegemony. It is important in an era in which the Metropolitan Police have been found to be institutionally homophobic, racist, and misogynistic by a recent high profile independent review (Casey, 2023) that this type of organisation, and the type of resistance it offered, is recognised in the political history of lesbians in Britain even if, or perhaps precisely because, it was so short-lived.

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The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.