

A Comparative Study of Police Organisational Changes in Europe during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Peter Neyroud

University of Cambridge



Jon Maskály

University of North Dakota



Sanja Kutnjak Ivković

Michigan State University

Abstract

Police organisations—like many other social institutions—were forced to make changes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This exploratory study uses data from 15 European countries to examine how the police organisations have adjusted their operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results suggest the way in which police organisations responded to the pandemic was complicated. Some police functions, such as handling of complaints and internal investigations, did not change substantially during the pandemic. On the other hand, functions which normally involved significant face-to-face contact within organisations, such as in-person rollcalls and police training, were substantially affected. Police organisations also changed their reactive policing activities, such as handling of calls for service, traffic stops, and taking people into custody, as well as proactive policing activities, such as community policing and directed patrols. The results further indicate that police administrators did not perceive that these changes would negatively affect either their relationship with the community nor morale within police organisations.

Keywords: Policing, COVID 19, organisational changes, leadership

Introduction

Police forces across the world are generally used to handling critical incidents, whether major natural disasters, major crimes or terrorist incidents. Although not planned events, most police forces have prepared for them and for coping with the rescue, recovery and in-

vestigation processes required by them. Few of these events last longer than a few days in their initial active phase and, generally, police forces are able to begin returning to “normality” shortly thereafter. When the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020), it called on countries “to take urgent and aggressive action” and

triggered a global critical incident that has, at time of writing, lasted for over a year, affected every country around the world and required a sustained critical incident response that can only be paralleled by global crises such as the Second World War.

In response to the COVID 19 pandemic, many governments declared a state of emergency and enacted a variety of measures designed to protect public health, ranging from restricting public gatherings and closing non-essential businesses, to imposing the stay-at-home orders and lockdowns. By April 2020, more than 3.9 billion people in over 90 countries were asked or ordered by their governments to stay at home to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Sandford, 2020).

The police found themselves in crisis mode. On the one hand, police officers had to protect themselves by wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) and limiting contact with the public, while simultaneously providing necessary police services to the public. Beyond the usual police responsibilities, the police have been charged with the task of enforcing COVID-19 measures newly enacted by the government, often with a lack of clear guidelines and adequate police training (Warren et al., 2020). As a result, police agencies have changed their internal operations and the manner in which they interact with the public (Alexander & Ekici, 2020; Lum et al., 2020; Maskaly et al., 2021a; Warren et al., 2020).

This paper seeks to explore the extent of the changes police organisations made during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research draws on a survey of senior executives, which was carried out after the first major phase of the pandemic and covered a sample of 28 countries in both the Global North and Global South (Maskaly et al., 2021a). In this paper, we focus specifically on the European countries in our sample. We assess the degree to which police agencies' organisation and operation have changed during the pandemic. In the process, we estimate these changes in the police agencies' internal organisation, their reactive policing strategies, and their proactive policing strategies.

Empirical research on changes in police organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic

As governments sought to cope with escalating hospitalisations and deaths during the first phase, most

police agencies across the world found themselves tasked with issuing fines and making arrests for violations of the COVID-19 restrictions (Warren et al., 2020). Some crime rates and calls for police service seem to have decreased, at least temporarily (Maskaly et al. 2020a; Nivette et al., 2021). Police agencies were required to adapt rapidly to these changes, while trying to protect their own staff from both contracting and spreading COVID-19.

An immediate area of concern for organisations was the acquisition of proper personal protective equipment (PPE) for employees and training in its proper use. Even police agencies in the Global North (e.g., USA) struggled to secure PPE for employees early in the pandemic. In our global survey of police agencies, we reported that the respondents from 75% of countries indicated that use of PPE has changed in response to COVID-19 and, as expected, dramatically increased during the pandemic (Maskaly et al., 2021a).

Police forces tried to reduce risk by minimising exposure to COVID-19 through limiting contact with the community. Police agencies minimised in-person proactive activities, such as community policing or problem-solving efforts, directed patrols, use of special operations teams and traffic stops (Maskaly et al., 2021a). The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) (2020) documented another strategy for police "self-isolation": a changed response to certain calls for service and the reliance on alternative reporting strategies (e.g., by phone, online). We found this same trend internationally as well with over two-thirds of countries reporting reduced number of arrests for minor crimes and about one-half of the countries reporting reduced the arrests for serious crimes as well (Maskaly et al., 2021a).

The changes to police organisations in response to the pandemic also affected their operations. Most police agencies modified personnel scheduling, assigned officers to work remotely and separately, and suspended in-person training—both academy and in-service (Alexander & Ekici, 2020). This trend was not isolated to the Global North: most police organisations reported decreased in-person training (86%) and increased remote work (63%) (Maskaly et al., 2021a).

Current Study

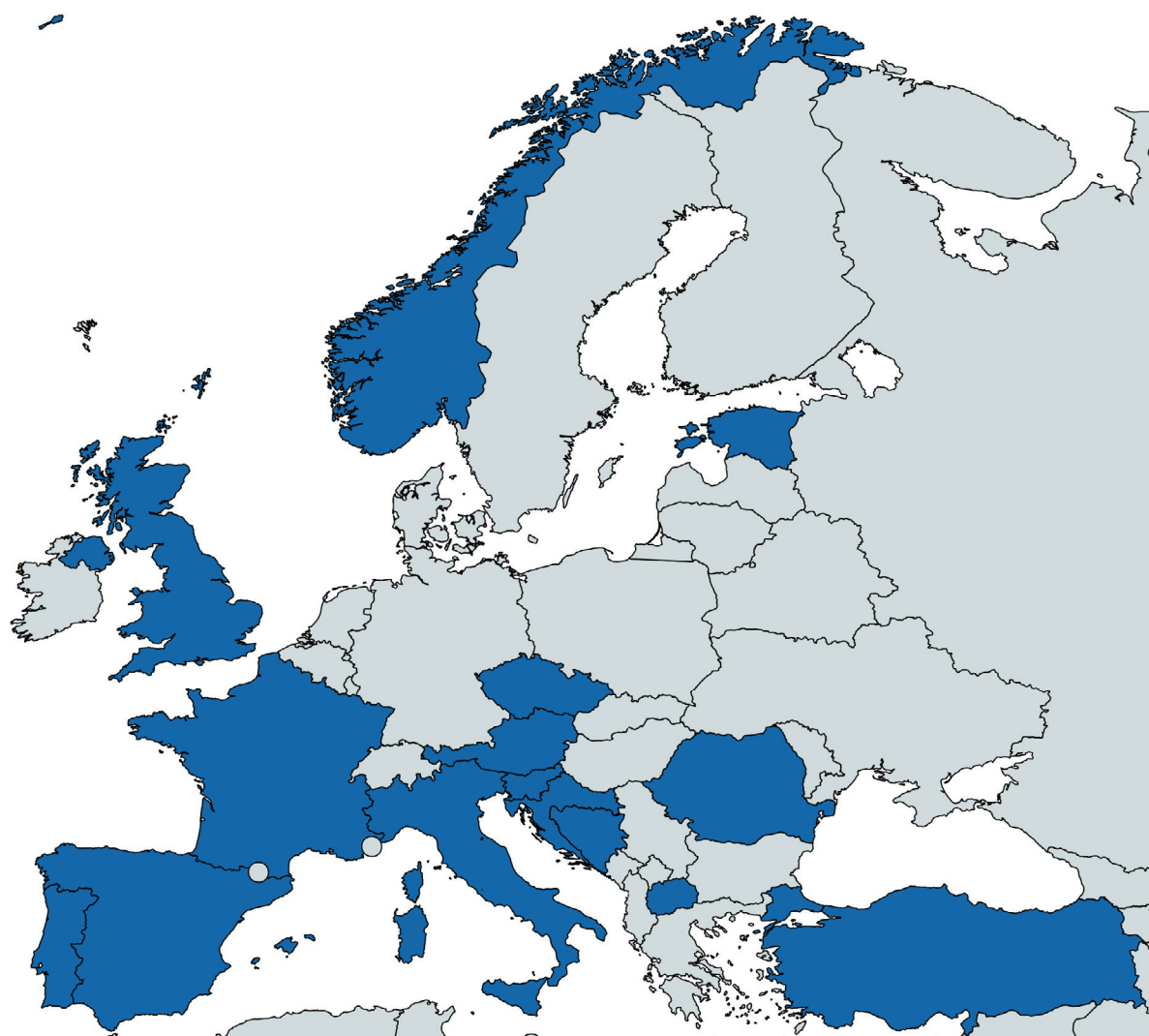
One of the findings that has emerged from early research examining the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on police operations around the world is the

amount of variability in the organisational responses to the pandemic. While there are some universal changes made by police organisations (such as augmented use of personal protective equipment), many others seem to be less universal and more contextual (Lum et al., 2020; Maskaly et al., 2020). This study seeks to contribute to our understanding of the ways the police organisations adapted by exploring the extent of these shifts in various aspects of police agencies' organisational and operational domains. Specifically, we not only measure whether policing in these domains has changed, but also their valence. In addition, we examine the anticipated consequences for both police agencies and the communities.

The data for this study were collected through an online survey administered to police executives around

the world. Our survey design drew on Police Executive Research Forum's (PERF) recommendations for police agencies (2020) and the results of the early systematic data collections from other researchers (Lum et al., 2020) and was informed by expert feedback from police executives in different countries (e.g., Croatia, South Korea, United Kingdom, and the United States). The questionnaire has sections asking about the magnitude of potential changes, the valence of those changes, and whether those changes were made as a result of organisational policy. In this article and in our wider research project, we have tried to understand not only how the police organisations adapted to the challenges of the pandemic, but also to propose and test some of the hypotheses advanced to explain the changes and their impacts.

Map 1: The European countries which provided survey responses (n. 15)



To ease the understanding of the findings, we will group similar items together (e.g., operational changes, proactive policing). Most of the questions in the questionnaire featured Likert-type scales. A fuller description of the questionnaire can be found in Maskaly et al. (2021a).

The data were collected through a digital survey using a restricted link—and associated password—that was sent to police executives in the summer of 2020 through two primary means. Firstly, the survey was distributed to member states of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Secondly, we reached out to organisations including The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training in Europe [CEPOL] and the National Police Chiefs Council in the UK.

Our unit of analysis is the nation state, because most countries responded to the pandemic at a national level. In total, we received the data from 28 countries. In this article we have focused on a subset of 15 European countries (Map 1). If multiple submissions were received for a country, we averaged all the responses to create an aggregate figure for that country and rounded them to the closest whole number, so that the results could be presented with the response anchors that were available for individual responses.

The measures in this study relate to the organisational changes implemented by police organisations. Specifically, we tap into potential organisational and operational changes made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Firstly, we created the index for each domain of policing to assess the magnitude of change (i.e., *absolute change*). This was measured on a 4-point Likert scale, from 0-4. Secondly, we explored the valence or direction of the change, that is, whether things increased, decreased, or remained the same (i.e., *valence of changes*). These items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from -2 (significantly decreased) to 2 (significantly increased). Third, we studied the anticipated consequences of such changes (i.e., *anticipated consequences*).

Table 1. Measures in the survey

Reassigned personnel to address staffing needs
Police officers working remotely
Use of vacation time
Shift briefings or roll calls
Police training
Use of civilians (non-sworn) personnel
Data collection and reporting by the police agency
Use of personal protective equipment
In person citizen contacts at the front desk
Field training
Public access to police facilities
Use of physically separated working locations for special units
Internal investigations of allegations of misconduct
Handling of citizen complaints against the police
Activities of special ops. (e.g., narcotics, gangs, traffic, vice)
Activities of special operations (e.g., cybercrime, online fraud)
Use of SWAT/tactical teams
Officer-initiated activities
Problem-solving and community-policing activities
Use of directed patrols or extra patrols
Ways in which citizens could report crime
Handling of calls for service
Traffic stops
Enforcement of laws dealing with minor crimes
Taking people into custody
Number of citizen complaints for non-COVID-19 policing
Number of Calls For Service (CFS) overall
Number of CFS handled in person
Number of family violence CFS
Number of traffic stops
Number of business alarms
Number of traffic crashes
Number of burglaries
Number of felony arrests
Number of misdemeanor arrests
Number of arrests for family violence
Number of arrests for domestic violence

Table 2: Research questions

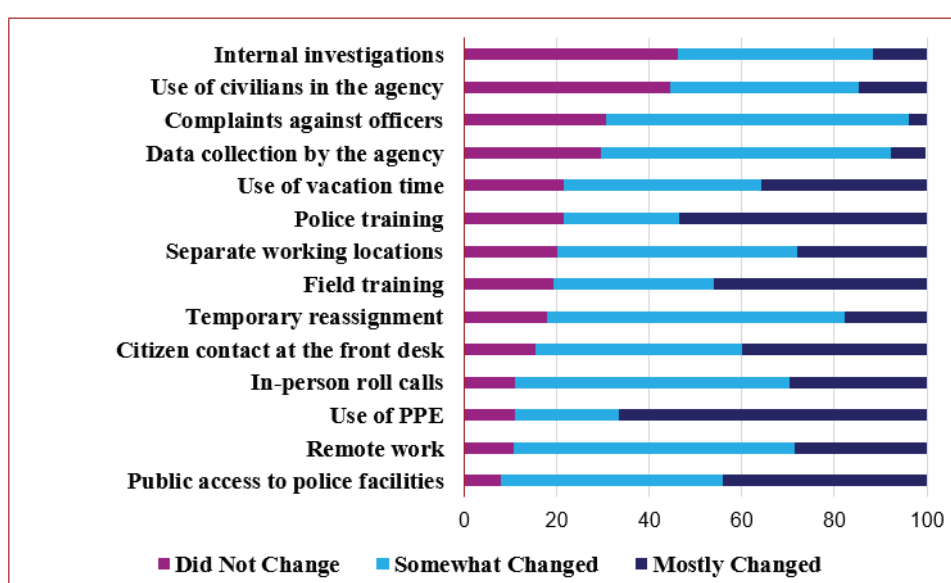
Sections	Shorthand
What has changed?	Absolute change
How much has it changed?	Valence
What are the anticipated consequences of these changes?	Anticipated consequences

With data from only 15 European countries, this study is descriptive in nature. The analyses proceed in three stages. First, we examine the *absolute change* in the four domains of policing (organisational structure, complaints and investigations, proactive activities, and reactive policing). Second, we examine the *valence of changes* in the five domains of policing (organisational structure, complaints and investigations, proactive activities, reactive policing, taking people into custody). Third, we measure the *anticipated consequences* of these changes on both police officers and citizens.

Results

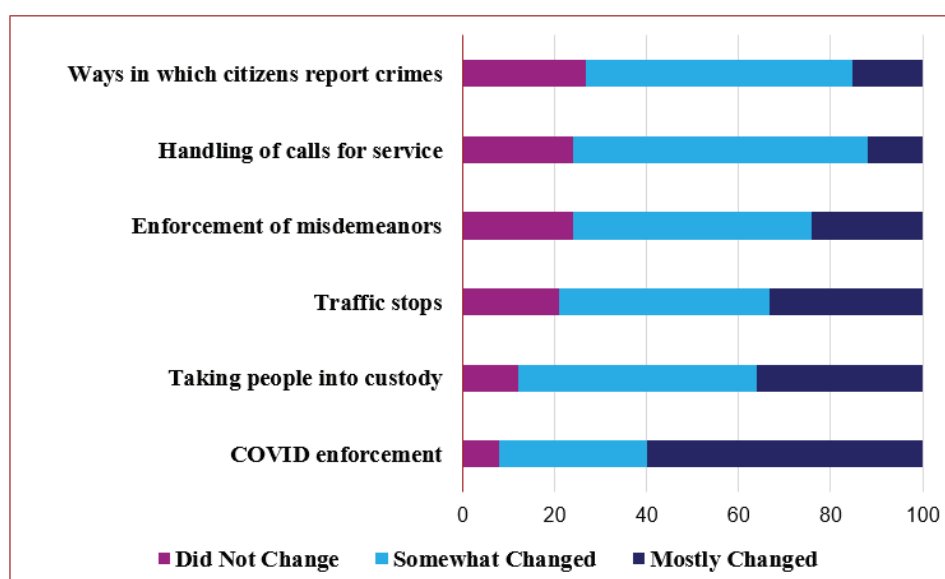
In the Figures 2-8 below, that we have selected to present in this paper, we show the aggregated data for each of the responding countries. In each figure we show percentages of the countries who reported a change and in three ranges (did not change, somewhat changed or mostly changed) or three levels of difference (decreased, did not change or increased).

Figure 1: Absolute Changes within Police Agencies by Percent of Countries with Changes



In Figure 2 we have shown the percent of countries reporting changes in a range of organisational functions, both internal and external. Overall, the findings demonstrate some change or significant change in each area. Some functions, such as complaints, internal investigations, and data collection by the police organisations were less likely to change in different countries and, hence, are more stable during the pandemic, whereas those internal and external functions which normally involved significant face-to-face contact were substantially affected.

The areas that were significantly affected include in-person rollcalls or briefings, public access to police facilities and front desks and training. In a clear response to COVID, the use of remote working and the adoption of PPE were 'mostly changed'. Given the importance of daily briefings, the use of PPE and the work location for the routines of policing, these findings suggest a very significant disruption to the normal patterns of frontline policing, whilst the internal bureaucracy and accountability carried on much more closely with normal business.

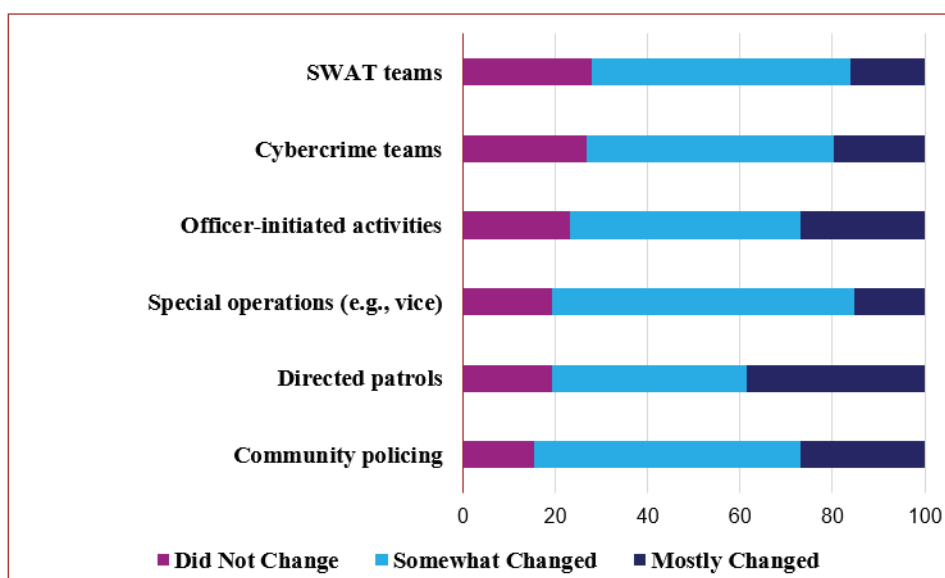
Figure 2: Absolute Changes in Reactive Policing by Percent of Countries with Changes

In exploring changes to 'reactive policing', the most significant changes were in the shift towards COVID enforcement operations. Our findings suggest that there was a more or less universal shift of emphasis towards COVID enforcement operations.

The change in traffic stops and enforcement of non-COVID minor crimes ('misdemeanors') whilst also significant were, at least partly, explicable by the substantial changes to the movement of people enforced

by the COVID restrictions. Likewise, given the falls in some day-to-day crimes such as shop theft (given that many shops were closed by restrictions), it is not surprising to see changes in the flow of people into police custody.

Most of the countries also changed the way in which their police officers handle calls for service. This included changes to the ways in which citizens reported crimes as well.

Figure 3: Absolute Changes in Proactive Policing by Percent of Countries with Changes

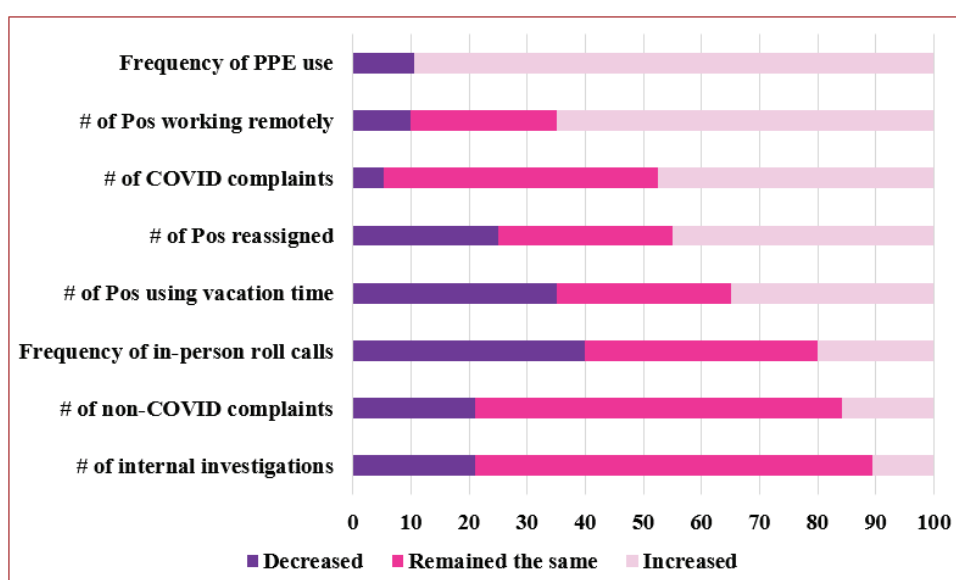
In focusing on changes in proactive policing (Figure 3), the changes were most significant in community policing. Community policing normally requires substantial face to face contact through public meetings, patrols and personal visits to local complainants and victims.

However, there were substantial changes across all areas of proactive policing. The survey documented changes to officer-initiated activities, special operations, directed patrols and the use of specialist teams such as SWAT. In a European context such specialist teams would include specialist public order as well as firearms teams.

In the second set of Figures, we focus on the *valence of changes*, which provide a clearer guide to the extent of the relative changes across the different functions and operational activities.

Figure 4 explores the valence or direction and strength of changes in the functions set out in Figure 1 above. This Figure reinforces the relative stability of internal accountability functions—internal investigations and non-COVID-19 complaints—that was suggested above. It also demonstrates the scale of the increase in the use of PPE and the shift towards remote working.

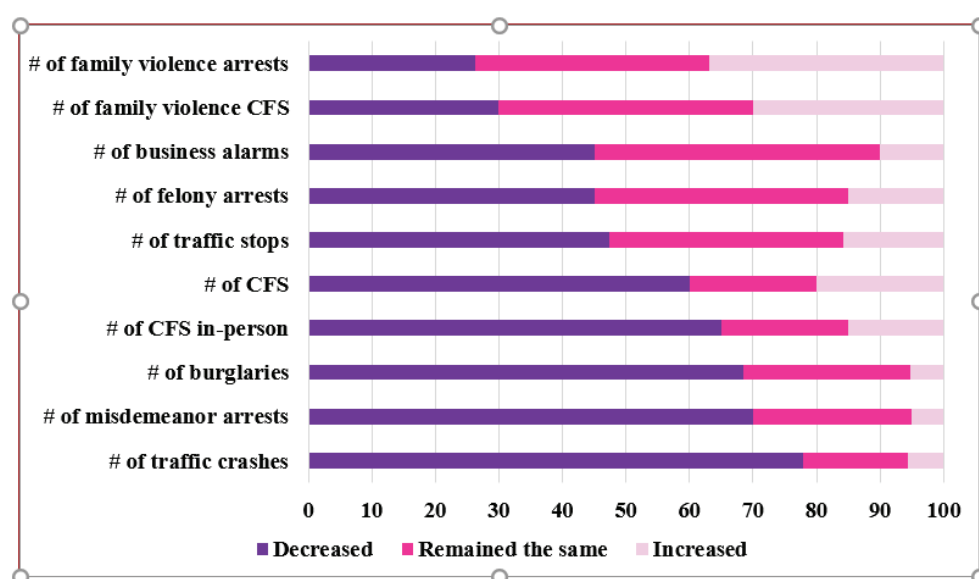
Figure 4: Valence of Changes within Police Agencies by Percent of Countries with Changes



In Figure 5, the data shows the extent of the reduction in volume of crime reactive policing and roads policing. With the reduction in movement of people and the requirement in most jurisdictions for people to stay at home, it is not surprising to see that these operational functions were most significantly affected across most countries in our study. The number of calls

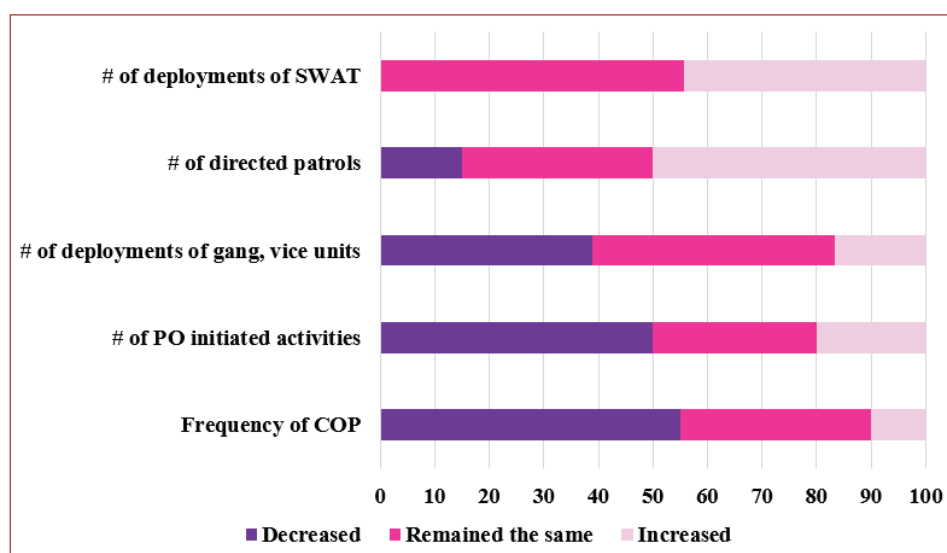
for service decreased overall, as did the prevalence of various reported crimes and related arrests.

In many of the crime areas, police administrators in more than half of the countries surveyed noted a clear decrease in the area. However, the apparent equipoise in the area of family violence is also worthy of note.

Figure 5: Valence of Changes in Reactive Policing by Percent of Countries with Changes

We have already seen above in Figure 3 that community policing appeared to be one of the most significantly affected operational areas. Figure 6 reinforces that finding: community policing showed the largest decrease in proactive policing activities, with the police administrators from more than half of the countries reporting a decrease.

Alongside this, there was also a significant decrease observed in police officer initiated proactive activities. In contrast to this, there was an apparent increase in nearly half of the sample of the responding countries in the deployments of special teams – “SWAT” or specialist weapons teams - which include specialist public order units.

Figure 6: Valence of Changes in Proactive Policing by Percent of Countries with Changes

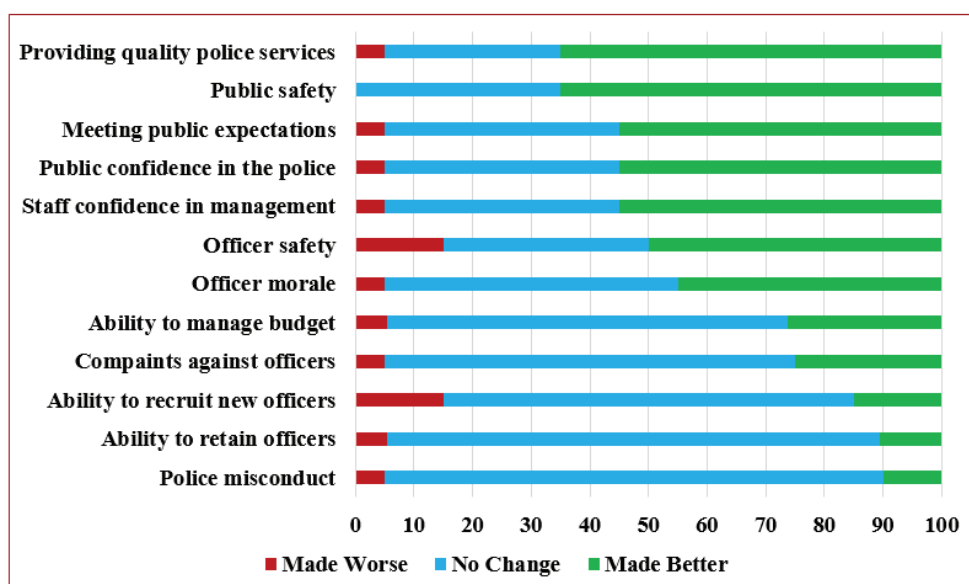
The final Figure - Figure 7 - focuses on the respondents' views of the likelihood of a set of potential consequences of policing the pandemic. Overall, despite the changes that we have documented

above, the police administrators from the majority of countries showed a level of optimism that service quality, public safety, public confidence and staff confidence in management either would not

change as a result of these changes or would tend to improve. Only in the impact on officer safety and

the ability to recruit new officers did some anticipate adverse impacts.

Figure 7: Anticipated Consequences by Percent of Countries with Changes



Discussion

This article has explored the impact of policing the pandemic on police organisations across a sample of 15 European countries. The findings have been developed from our wider global survey, which we have set out in Maskaly et al. (2021a and 2021b), and reflect the responses to our survey instrument by senior executives in the police forces. The responses were received shortly after the first wave – May to July 2020 – of the COVID 19 pandemic. Our results show that police agencies' operational and organisational domains have changed during the first phase of the pandemic.

While some aspects of police organisation (e.g., internal investigations, handling of complaints) remained relatively stable during the first phase of the pandemic, other aspects of police organisation that include face-to-face contacts (e.g., in-person rollcalls, training) were significantly changed. In addition, partly in response to the changes in citizen behaviour during the pandemic and related lockdowns, reactive policing activities (e.g., how arrests are handled, arrest for minor crimes) and proactive policing activities (e.g., community policing, directed patrols) changed as well.

Our findings suggest how significant a challenge to normal policing routines the pandemic proved to be in its first (and we suggest subsequent) phase. Whether it be answering calls for service or responding to emergencies, investigating crimes, handling (literally) offenders, attending town hall meetings or briefing and training officers, policing in normal times requires officers to be face to face with the public they serve, the suspects that they are dealing with and their colleagues. The survey shows that most of the European police forces who responded experienced a significant degree of disruption to the "normal" in the first phase. That disruption appeared to be concentrated more heavily in reactive operation functions (e.g., calls for service, arrests for minor crimes, traffic crashes) and proactive operation functions (e.g., community policing).

At same time, officers were required to engage in the new duty – the enforcement of COVID-19 restriction regulations. In our wider analysis of the global survey (Maskaly et al., 2021a&b) we documented the concerns of police administrators across the world at the muddled and poorly communicated restriction requirements that they were charged with enforcing. Our work has also suggested that the urgency of changes was driven most strongly by the data about death rates rather than other cues, which suggests that

perceptions of the legitimacy of police enforcement might also have a similar relationship with the health data. Whilst our respondents were generally optimistic about the impact of changes on policing during the first phase of the pandemic and the consequent changes to police operations, we consider that the combined effect of reduced community policing and face to face policing with an enhanced enforcement may have medium and long term consequences for perceptions of police legitimacy and confidence in the police management.

Relatedly, we see that there are changes in the frequency of certain call types during the lockdown. Notably, there has been a keen interest surrounding the effects of the pandemic on domestic violence. We specifically examined the police chiefs' perceptions about the number of calls for service for family violence, the number of family violence arrests, and the number of domestic violence arrests. Interestingly, we see that there is a perception of a decrease in the number of DV arrests (i.e., the confidence interval does not intersect with 0), while we cannot see as clear of a pattern for the number of calls for service or arrests for family violence. We posit two potential explanations here. First, the effects of the pandemic on the instances of domestic violence may be driven by a host of other factors beyond the pandemic itself. In other words, the pandemic likely does not affect everyone equally. For some unmeasured—at least in this study—reason domestic violence may become more problematic in some locations but not others. Second, we see that there is some confusion over the interchangeable use of the terms “family violence” and “domestic violence”. In some locations the distinction between these two phenomena is meaningful, while it may not be in others. We would recommend that subsequent research more explicitly differentiate what these terms should mean to local participants.

We see that some operational changes have multiple potential factors affecting the change. For instance, the number of traffic stops and traffic crashes decreased in jurisdictions. However, we are unsure if these factors were driven by changes in the driving populace (i.e.,

reduction in cars on the road) and/or were a result of organisational changes (e.g., prohibition on making traffic stops). It could also be that there was a change in the driving behavior, but anecdotal evidence in the media suggests that many traffic stops involved people well exceeding the speed limit in a particular jurisdiction. One media account recounts the story of a motorist who was stopped for traveling at 130 miles per hour (209 kilometers per hour) in a 65 mile per hour (105 kilometers per hour) zone (Lazo, 2020).

Likewise, we see that the police chiefs perceive that the number of serious and minor crime arrests in most jurisdictions generally declined, but this could be due to downstream decisions of other criminal justice organisations (i.e., jails minimising admissions) or organisational changes (i.e., explicit orders to stop arresting unless certain conditions are met). It remains unclear what the reason for these decisions was and what the effects will be on subsequent case processing.

Finally, this research should be seen as part of a conversation. As we write, we have the benefit of knowing that the pandemic has lasted more than a year beyond the survey we undertook in 2020. Our data provides an important glimpse in the “rear view mirror” at a key point in time in the first phase of the pandemic. Furthermore, in our wider global survey (Maskaly et al., 2021 a&b), we have data from 14.4% of the countries accounting for 35.8% of the world's population, so adding other countries may change the substantive conclusions drawn here. In addition, it may be just as important to look at what is happening within these countries. We consistently see a great deal of heterogeneity from those countries from which we received multiple responses. This suggests that it may be necessary to look at these issues and the effects of the pandemic at different levels (i.e., country, regional, locally) to fully understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected police organisations. Above all, we regard it as essential for researchers to continue to look: the COVID 19 pandemic is the single largest global event since the Second World War. Policing has had a central role throughout the pandemic and for good or ill, it seems highly likely that the pandemic will leave a lasting impact on policing.

References

- Alexander, D.C., & Ekici, N. (2020) Survey: COVID-19's impact on LE operations.
Retrieved from <https://www.police1.com/coronavirus-covid-19/articles/survey-covid-19s-impact-on-le-operations-JmGm4beDhdAHhrE5/>
- Lazo, L. (2020) The coronavirus pandemic emptied America's roadways. Now speeders have taken over. *Washington Post*, March 11, 2020.
Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/the-coronavirus-pandemic-emptied-americas-highways-now-speeders-have-taken-over/2020/05/10/c98d570c-8bb4-11ea-9dfd-990f9dcc71fc_story.html [Accessed 25 September 2020].
- Lum, C., Maupin, C., & Stoltz, M. (2020) The impact of COVID-19 on law enforcement agencies (Wave 2).
Available from: https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/IACP_Covid_Impact_Wave2.pdf [Accessed 27 September 2020].
- Maskály J., Kutnjak Ivković S. & Neyroud P. (2021a) Policing the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploratory Study of the Types of Organizational Changes and Police Activities Across the Globe. *International Criminal Justice Review*, 31(3), pp.266-285. doi:10.1177/10575677211012807
- Maskaly, J., Kutnjak Ivkovic, S. & Neyroud, P.W. (2021b) A Comparative Study of Police Organizational Changes During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Responding to Public Health Crisis or Something Else? *Policing: a Journal of Policy and Practice*, forthcoming
- National Police Foundation (2020) COVID-19 resources for law enforcement.
Retrieved from <https://www.policefoundation.org/covid-19/#FAQs>
- Nivette, A.E., Zahnow, R., Aguilar, R., Ahven, A., Amram, S., Ariel, B., Burbano, M.J.A., Astolfi, R., Baier, D., Bark, H.-M., Beijers, J.E.H., Bergman, M., Breetzke, G., Concha-Eastman, I.A., Curtis-Ham, S., Davenport, R., Díaz, C., Fleitas, D., Gerell, M., Jang, K.-H., Kääriäinen, J., Lappi-Seppälä, T., Lim, W.-S., Revilla, R.L., Mazerolle, L., Meško, G., Pereda, N., Peres, M.F.T., Poblete-Cazenave, R., Rose, S., Svensson, R., Trajtenberg, N., Van Der Lippe, T., Veldkamp, J., Perdomo, C.J.V. & Eisner, M.P. (2021) A global analysis of the impact of COVID-19 stay-at-home restrictions on crime. *Nature Human Behaviour* 5, 868–877. doi:10.1038/s41562-021-01139-z
- Police Executive Research Forum [PERF] (2020) Responding to COVID-19.
Retrieved from <https://www.policeforum.org/covid-19-response>
- Sandford, A. (2020) Coronavirus: Half of humanity now on lockdown as 90 countries call for confinement. *Euronews*.
Retrieved from <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/02/coronavirus-in-europe-spain-s-death-toll-hits-10-000-after-record-950-new-deaths-in-24-hou>
- Warren, F., Gualco, F., Davidson, H., & Edginton, E. (2020) Part 1 – International policing responses to COVID-19: During lockdown. Justice Directorate of the Scottish Government.
Retrieved from <https://www.gov.scot/publications/part-1-international-policing-responses-covid-19-during-lockdown/pages/6/>
- World Health Organization [WHO] (2020) Timeline of WHO's response to COVID-19.
Retrieved from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/29-06-2020-covidtimeline> [Accessed 27 September 2020].
- Worldometers (2020) Coronavirus worldwide graphs.
Retrieved from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/worldwide-graphs/#total-cases>