

# Recruitment, education and careers in the police: a European longitudinal study

**Tore Bjørge**  
Norway



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What characterises the kinds of people recruited to police work? How are they shaped by police education and socialisation into the profession? And how do different systems of police recruitment and education impact on the attitudes and views on police work of the new police officers produced by these systems? These are fundamental questions for police science as well as for institutions providing police education.

However, at least until recently, there has been surprisingly little systematic comparative and longitudinal research on recruitment to the police and the impact of police education and police practice on new police officers. Until now, there have only been longitudinal studies of police students and new police officers limited to single countries or cities: in the USA (Van Maanen 1973), in the UK (Fielding, 1988), in France (Monjardet & Gorgeon 1999), in Australia (Chan 2003), in Canada (Alain & Grégoire 2008), and in Sweden (Lauritz 2010). Unfortunately, although these different national studies are all longitudinal, they have used different methodological designs, questionnaires or interview guides, thereby producing data which are not directly comparable. It is, of course, possible to compare and discuss the findings from these different national studies, and then the fact that methodological designs are different may even be a strength, as quantitative and qualitative studies with different questions and time spans may provide complementary insights. Still, these studies do not provide comparable data.

## A comparative and longitudinal research design

It is a widely held view in CEPOL circles and among many police researchers that there is a great need for more comparative policing research in Europe. However, it is not always clear what comparative research really means. In the CEPOL study on Police Science Perspectives: Towards a European Approach (del Barrio Romero, Bjørge, Jaschke, Kwanten, Mawby & Pagon 2009) two very different views on comparative research on policing were expressed. One position held that comparison in the field of policing is mainly 'exchange of information and experience into systematic ways of learning from each other' (pp. 181-182). The other position held that:

What is needed is not more 'comparative seminars' where representatives from different countries tell their stories about how policing is in their countries. Without comparable data, such exercises are of limited value. A far more ambitious approach is to develop systematic comparative studies based on shared methodological instruments, used to collect and produce truly comparative data. National differences can then be used as variables to test hypotheses, build theory and evaluate practices in policing (!).

The research project presented in this paper is clearly an example of the latter approach to comparative

(!) This statement was written by the author (Tore Bjørge), as one of his contributions to the joint CEPOL study, which incorporated opposing points of view on several issues, on p. 93.

research<sup>(2)</sup>. Our research design is based on a longitudinal survey instrument developed by the Centre for the Study of Professions at Oslo University College, the so-called StudData survey<sup>(3)</sup>. Their original design was to present the respondents with partly identical sets of questions during different phases of their careers to register a development of attitudes, preferences and adoption of norms. The questionnaires are distributed to the students in four phases: at the beginning and end of their education, and three years and six years into their professional life. Thus, some core questions are repeated in the various phases, and other questions are added to relate to their specific professional situation. The respondents are anonymous to the researchers, identifiable only through a coded ID key (kept secure and separate from their questionnaires) to protect their identity and privacy. The methodology makes it possible to trace changes at individual as well as at group levels.

So far, 20 professional (mainly Bachelor's) programmes and 11 Norwegian universities and university colleges have participated in the project, comprising students from professional educations as diverse as teachers, social workers, engineers, librarians, nurses, journalists and medical doctors. A large database with comparable longitudinal data is now available for researchers. For some of the programmes, two or three panels (cohorts with some years in between) have been studied.

Hence, the original StudData design makes it possible to compare students from different professional educations, how their values and attitudes change through the four phases of their education and careers, and also compare how different cohorts may differ.

The idea to adapt the StudData design to police students/officers was first presented by this author in the original 2007 CEPOL report *Perspectives on police science in Europe* (pp. 80-81; p. 93 in the expanded

2009 version). In that initiative, the original StudData design was pushed one step further by introducing an international comparative dimension. This is of particular interest in European police research, since we know that systems of police education and training varies considerably throughout Europe, with three-year Bachelor's degrees for all new police officers in some countries, and ten weeks of formal training combined with on-the-job training in some other countries. The status and trust of the police in the population also differs much in various European countries. The StudData research design with an added cross-country comparative dimension would then be the perfect methodological instrument to test the impact of these different systems of police education on who are recruited to the police, how their education/training shapes their values and views on policing, and how exposure to the field of practice and socialisation into police culture impacts on their attitudes and outlooks.

Since 2008, a group of researchers has worked together to develop this design into an ambitious European comparative and longitudinal study of recruitment, education and careers in the police. The initial group consisted of researchers from institutions providing police education in Norway, Sweden and Finland. Selecting the most relevant parts of the original StudData questionnaire, they added a number of police-specific questions to bring in some of the core issues of police science into the questionnaire<sup>(4)</sup>.

A draft version of the questionnaire for new police students (phase 1) was tested in Norway and Sweden in 2009<sup>(5)</sup>. Researchers from similar institutions in other European countries were also invited to join the project. By autumn 2010, institutions of police education from ten European countries were committed to take part in the project:

- Norway

<sup>(2)</sup> Other good examples of truly comparative studies are Johannes Knutsson's study of the police use of fire arms in the Nordic countries (Knutsson 2005) and Wouter Stol's study of 'Policing the streets of Europe' (included in this volume).

<sup>(3)</sup> See the StudData homepage: <http://www.hio.no/Enheter/Senter-for-profesjonsstudier-SPS/StudData> (2010-12-14). A longitudinal research design is a study that involves repeated observations of the same items over long periods of time.

<sup>(4)</sup> Some questions taken from the European Social Survey on political orientation and trust in other people were also included in our questionnaire, to allow for a comparison between the attitudes of police students/officers and the general population in the relevant countries.

<sup>(5)</sup> The first study based on data from the pilot study was presented at CEPOL's Research and Science conference in Oslo in October 2010, by Silje Bringsrud Fekjær on 'Police Students' Social Background, Attitudes and Career Plans'. The study is now submitted for review in an international journal.

- Sweden
- Finland
- Iceland
- Estonia
- Germany (Hessen, Thüringen, Brandenburg, Hamburg)
- Belgium
- Hungary
- Slovenia
- Spain (Catalonia) <sup>(6)</sup>.

By including this wide range of European countries with different systems of police education, police organisations and styles of policing into the project, it will expand the range of differences and thereby the possibilities for fruitful comparative analysis. These data collected on the basis of our research design will make it possible to do comparative analysis along at least four dimensions:

- Longitudinally — how individual police students change over time as their careers progress
- Between different cohorts — e.g. before and after educational reforms
- Between countries (and institutions within countries)
- Between professions — how police students differ from e.g. teacher/nurse/social work students

### How can this project contribute to the development of police science?

Police science is a new interdisciplinary and applied discipline, emerging in response to the development of the police as a knowledge-based profession rather than as a craft. Police science has been described as ‘the scientific study of the police as an institution and of policing as a process’ <sup>(7)</sup>. How can the police version of the StudData project contribute to the development of police science? Which core questions and issues of police science may then be addressed (and possibly

<sup>(6)</sup> The two first participant countries carried out data collection for Phase 1 during August and September 2010: Norway (N=637, response rate 88 %) and Catalonia (N=1282, response rate 98 %). The other countries will follow suit in 2011.

<sup>(7)</sup> This definition is provided by Romero, Bjørgo, Jaschke, Kwanten, Mowby & Pagon (2009). *Police Science Perspectives: Towards a European Approach*. Extended Expert Report. Frankfurt: Verlag für Polizeiwissenschaft, p. 30.

answered) by this kind of comparative and longitudinal data? Here are some examples <sup>(8)</sup>:

What characterises persons recruited to the police education and profession? This may be analysed by such dimensions as gender, age, geographic (urban/rural) and ethnic origin, class background, prior education and work experience, values and attitudes in relation to general political issues as well as issues related to views on policing and crime, motivations for joining the police and expectations of their own future in the police profession. In what ways do police students differ from students seeking other types of professions (such as social workers, teachers, nurses or journalists) in terms of motivation or identification with the profession?

How does the police education process influence the values/attitudes, motivations and expectations of the police students? In what ways are police education and training socialising them into a police role? Do their values, motivations and expectations change during their time of study? Measurements at the beginning and end of their education may provide some answers.

How does experience with the field of practice by working in the police and among police colleagues influence their values/attitudes, motivations and expectations after three years or six years of police work? Are they able to maintain their idealism or do they become cynical towards the public and their organisation or leaders? There are strong reasons to expect that socialisation into such a strong ‘community of practice’ as the police force will have a powerful impact on the values, attitudes and outlooks of the individuals. To what extent do new police officers become less trustful in other people as they gradually integrate a police role as part of their personality? Does this exposure to the field of practice make a stronger impact than police education did? To what degree do the new police officers take further education or academic degrees? What are their professional ambitions? Do they end up in the positions and specialisations they aspired to at an earlier stage? Is there any link between what attracted them to the police education early on and what they actually end

<sup>(8)</sup> Ibid, p. 93.

up doing? Do they stay in the police force or do they leave the profession?

Are there significant differences between the types of persons recruited to police education in the various European countries in terms of background and motivations? If so, to what extent can this be explained in terms of different types of police education? If measurements are made before and after a major reform in police education in the direction of a more academic Bachelor's education, as will take place in several European countries during the next few years, it might be possible to study the impact of major changes in police education on the backgrounds and motivations of the new students<sup>(9)</sup>. To what extent may such reforms in police education also impact the police and police culture in the long run? Findings might be of considerable interest to police organisations in other European countries who are considering reforming their police education systems.

How can police education improve police practice? Significant parts of the StudData questionnaire have an evaluative purpose: to improve the pedagogical quality of the teaching and learning methods; the social experience of the police students at their place of study; and the relevance of their study in relation to their future profession as police officers. By comparing different curricula at different police educations in different countries it might be possible to identify better (if not 'best') practices.

Does diversity in policing matter? In most European countries, there are strong efforts to change the gender and ethnic composition of the police to reflect the population better and provide better police services to all segments of the population. Do female police students/officers experience their education and professional practice differently from the way men do? Do students with an ethnic minority background experience this differently from police students/officers with an ethnic majority background? How do gender and ethnic background impact on other variables in the survey, such as values or expectations for future employment?

### Final remarks

These core questions in police research can be studied — and to a large extent answered — through the data sets that will be collected in this comparative and longitudinal study of recruitment, education and careers in the police. The project will also facilitate practical collaboration between police researchers in many European countries. These kinds of comparative studies, based on shared methodological instruments, used to collect and produce truly comparable data, are necessary if we want to develop police science as a discipline. National differences can then be used as variables to test hypotheses, build theory and evaluate practices in policing in Europe.

<sup>(9)</sup> When Norway in 1993-1995 changed its police education from a two-year vocational type of education into a three-year college education (eventually to become a bachelor degree under the Bologna system in 2005), there was a clear impression that after this educational reform, the Police University College recruited a different type of students with a different background and somewhat different attitudes than before. The general view is that the change was for the better. However, there was no effort to study systematically whether this was actually the case, which was obviously a missed opportunity for evaluating the reform. Other countries planning for educational reform may seek to capitalize on the outcomes of an extensive evaluation of their police educational system by joining the StudData project, which provides an excellent tool for this task.

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### Postscript (January 2017)

RECPOL, as the project is now named, has evolved considerably since the article above was originally written in late 2010. The list of participating countries (on page 260) has changed. Finland, Germany, Estonia and Hungary dropped out of the project for various reasons. On the other hand, Denmark joined the project in 2012 <check>. Thus, in the end seven countries actually participated: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Scotland, Belgium, and Catalonia in Spain. Most of these countries started data collection for phase 1 in fall 2010. By spring 2016, phase 1 and phase 2 data have been collected in six of the seven countries. The exception is Scotland where data has only been collected for phase 1. Phase 3 data (three years into practice) is now being collected in several countries but not yet analysed. After tedious checking, a complete data file (SPSS) with phase 1 and phase 2 data of all participant countries was made available for comparative analysis for the research team in May 2016. The first results were presented at the European Society of Criminology (ESC) conference in Münster in September 2016, in the form of nine papers presented at two consecutive panels. Some of the findings were also presented at the CEPOL conference in Budapest in October 2016. Revised versions of these (and some additional) papers will be published in a forthcoming edited volume with the working title "Police Officers in the Making". A second volume is

planned at a later stage, when we have collected and analysed data from phase 3 and 4, where the new police officers have gained three or six years of experience from the field of practice.

The presentations at the ESC and CEPOL conferences aroused interest among police researchers from several countries in Central and Eastern Europe and some of them decided to join the RECPOL project. This includes at least Georgia, Hungary and Slovenia, possibly more countries as well. This will be of great comparative importance as the original group of participant countries were predominantly from Northern and Western Europe. A broader range of countries, representing a greater variation in police cultures and political contexts, will provide significant added value to the RECPOL database and to police research in Europe. Although these countries came on board too late to be included in the first edited volume, their results might be included in the second RECPOL volume. Furthermore, the RECPOL data will eventually be made available to other scholars. Thus, the RECPOL data base will be a treasure for police researchers in years to come.

#### Tore Bjørge

Coordinator of the RECPOL project