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ARTICLE

Punitive attitudes and victimization among police officers in Switzerland: an empirical exploration

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ABSTRACT

Policework involves a high level of risk, and police officers are frequently victimized while on duty. However, victimization rates differ considerably within the police corps and depend on a number of personal and situational variables. This research is based on a survey of police officers in the canton of St. Gallen, Switzerland (N = 478). It follows two research paths to investigate the link between punitive attitudes and victimization experiences: punitiveness as a factor in higher victimization rates, and victimization experiences causing an increase in punitive attitudes. The results showed no significant difference between male and female officers in terms of punitiveness, and that punitiveness significantly increased with age. Also, punitiveness was found to decrease as the hours spent on street patrol duty increased. Examining the link between victimization and punitiveness, this study also found a surprising effect that officers without victimization experiences in the three years prior to the survey showed significantly higher levels of punitiveness than their victimized colleagues. Furthermore, officers who experienced victimization were found to become less punitive as the time they spent on the street increased, while the opposite was true for their non-victimized counterparts. These a priori counterintuitive results could possibly be explained by a 'professionalization' or a 'familiarization' effect and serve as a basis for further research as well as for police practice and training.

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Victimization; punitiveness; punitive attitudes; police officers

Introduction

Police officers are frequently exposed to violence when performing work duties, more so than most other professionals. Policework is said to be one of the most dangerous and stressful occupations (Leino, Selin, Summala, & Virtanen, 2011, p. 401; Hine et al., 2016, p. 1). It involves multiple inherent risks and, consequently, produces high rates of victimization (van Reemst, Fischer, & Zwirs, 2015, p. 635). However, despite the consistently high level of victimization, variations in the victimization experiences of different police officers are considerable.

In order to explain this variation, the main body of research in this area has focused on opportunity-related theories and situational characteristics (e.g., Barrick, Hickman, & Strom, 2014; Kaminski, Jefferis, & Gu, 2003). Demographic variables related to both victims and offenders have also been considered in efforts to explain differences in victimization rates (e.g., Covington, Huff-Corzine, & Corzine, 2014). Additionally, social-psychological correlations such as response decisions (van Reemst et al., 2015), the nature of interactions (Alpert, Dunham, & MacDonald,

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2004), the impact of personality (Ellrich & Baier, 2016), occupational stress, and burnout rate (Ellrich, 2016a) on victimization have all been studied. This last research cluster is based on the hypothesis that not only situational and demographic characteristics, but also personal attitudes and perceptions might directly influence police-citizen encounters, and therefore constitute relevant variables for explaining police officer victimization.

In line with this last research area, the present study examines punitiveness as an explanatory factor for and potential consequence of victimization experiences. In focusing on punitive attitudes among police officers and the relationship between such attitudes and victimization, this research examines the potential correlation between officers' punitive perceptions and their victimization. Research addressing punitive attitudes among police officers is scarce (see, however, Recasens, 2011, p. 211; Chen, 2016; Ellrich, 2016b), and the relationship between police victimization and attitude has thus lacked scholarly attention.

The underlying assumption of this study is a potentially double-directed correlation. On the one hand, victimization experiences may impact an officer's personal punitive attitudes. On the other, these punitive perceptions may impact the way the officer acts towards and deals with conflict-based encounters with civilians (cf. Ellrich, 2016b, p. 1), perhaps in ways that could lead to increased victimization risk. In order to explore this potential correlation and its determining variables, the current research examines data from a victimization survey of police officers in eastern Switzerland and assesses two relevant variables – victimization and punitive attitudes among officers – and the relationship between the two. Doing so, it is aimed to gain valuable insights to interrelationships between personal attitudes and victimization, which can serve as a foundation for possible implications for police practice and training not only in Switzerland but anywhere.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Victimization of police officers

Policework is one of the top five occupations for injuries resulting from job-related violence (Prenzler, 2012). Considering the amount of conflict-based interventions required, the relatively high victimization rate is unsurprising (Bliesener, Klatt, & Jager, 2015, p. 305). According to a German study, four out of five police officers with citizen contact experienced at least one non-physical attack, and more than half of all officers reported violent victimization in the last 12 months (Jager, Klatt, & Bliesener, 2013, p. 48). Similar results were found in a recent Dutch study, with nearly 90% of police officers reporting verbal violence and more than 60% describing physical violence within the last six months (van Reemst et al., 2015, p. 643). Although results vary by country and study, policework clearly involves a high risk of victimization, and assaults on officers are not a peripheral phenomenon. Rather, they are a part of everyday policework.

As stated above, efforts to explain differences in police officer victimization and victimization in general have mainly employed opportunity-related approaches, as suggested by lifestyle theory (Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978) or routine-activity approaches (Cohen & Felson, 1979) involving situational variables (cf. van Reemst et al., 2015, p. 636). These theories argue that the exposure of potential victims to motivated offenders as well as lacking guardianship increase the probability of victimization (Kaminski, 2004; Covington et al., 2014, p. 35). Following this assumption, higher rates of victimization can be explained by the frequency of contact with (potential) delinquents, a hypothesis that has been validated empirically (Killias, Kuhn, & Aebi, 2011, p. 263). Therefore, opportunity theory can be used to explain why the victimization rate of police officers is higher than that of the general population. Furthermore, such theories clarify the differences in rates among police officers, as studies have found that victimization varies according to the officer's concrete work location and the characteristic of their work (Manzoni, 2003; Barrick et al., 2014; van Reemst et al., 2015, p. 636). Victimization experiences of police officers take place particularly in public spaces and also frequently when the police has to intervene actively, e.g., in disputes or

arrests. It is therefore not surprising that the group of officers with patrol service showed to be especially affected by assaults (Ellrich, Baier, & Pfeiffer, 2012, p. 19–20). Indeed, research has shown that the context of the situation is essential to predicting the likelihood of victimization (e.g., Covington et al., 2014, p. 45). However, as these opportunity-related approaches have only been able to explain such differences to a limited extent (van Reemst et al., 2015, p. 636), it will be of interest to further analyse potential difference between categories of officers.

With respect to victim characteristics, current research remains inconclusive: Some studies have found being male to be a risk factor (e.g., Driessen & Middelhoven, 2002; Bragason, 2006, p. 6; Baier and Ellrich, 2014, p. 110), while others did not find gender to have any significant influence (e.g., Manzoni, 2003). Younger officers tended to report victimization more often (e.g., Jager et al., 2013, p. 58ff; Ellrich, 2016b, p. 8). A recent American study, however, stated that officer demographics such as age and race were not significantly related to the likelihood of becoming a victim of assault (Covington et al., 2014, p. 45ff). In sum, the relevance of demographic variables remains unclear, but is certainly diminished when situational factors such as area of duty and characteristics of work are considered.

Punitive attitudes among police officers

Assessing punitiveness

Punitive attitudes among the general population have been intensely researched in criminology (e.g., Cochran & Piquero, 2011; Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000; Kury, 2015; Roberts & Hough, 2002; van Kesteren, 2009). It is important to emphasize that the current research thereby focuses on punitive attitudes on an individual level, in contrast to punitiveness as a supra-individual value (i.e., on a macro level) or in the sense of political or judicial punitiveness (Kury et al., 2009, p. 65). At this individual level, punitiveness ‘represents an attitude to punishment that shows evidence of a tendency on stricter and retributive sanctions over milder ones, when dealing with transgression’ (Kemme, Hanslmaier, & Pfeiffer, 2014, p. 129). Therefore, punitiveness includes, among other factors, a desire for harsher punishment (Adriaenssen & Aertsen, 2015, p. 99; Ellrich, 2016b, p. 2).

However, notions of punitiveness and punitive attitudes can imply different concepts and multidimensional constructions, which is why further differentiation is necessary (Kury & Obergfell-Fuchs, 2008a, p. 231; Kemme & Doering, 2015, p. 544). Due to the lack of a clear concept or universal definition, scientific approaches to measuring punitive attitudes vary considerably by study. The concept is considered to be under-theorized and rather vague (Mathews, 2005, p. 178; Adriaenssen & Aertsen, 2015, p. 92). Because of the substantial variety and method-based challenges to researching punitive attitudes, study results have barely been comparable (Kury & Obergfell-Fuchs, 2008a, p. 233; Kemme & Doering, 2015, p. 546).

Assessing police officers’ punitiveness

Police officials’ punitiveness as an object of research has gained only minimal attention. The existing literature does, however, indicate that police officers tend to be in favour of harsher punishments than the rest of the population (Fielding & Fielding, 1991; Furnham and Alison, 1994, p. 35; Kury et al., 2009). However, one of the few empirical studies explicitly focusing on this question found other results. In Germany, more than 20,000 police officers were interviewed online as part of a wide-ranging 2010 study on victimization; respondents were queried on multiple topics, including four items regarding punitive attitudes (Ellrich, Baier, & Pfeiffer, 2011, p. 85ff). A control group comprised of the general population was asked the same questions. In contrast to previous research, that study found that police officers tended to be significantly less punitive than the rest of the population, even when relevant demographic characteristics were considered (Ellrich, 2012, p. 11ff). These differences could be explained, along with other reasons, by variations in the German police culture from that found in other

countries (Ellrich, 2016b, p. 12). Therefore, the need for further evaluation of this topic is clear. Due to cultural similarities, it is thereby likely that the (Eastern) Swiss police culture turns out to be comparable with the German one.

Although research on police officers' punitive attitudes is not wide spread, there is considerable knowledge that can serve as a basis for discussion. According to Kemme and Doering (2015, p. 550) it is generally plausible to assume that people being exposed to a higher risk of violent victimization due to their profession and, therefore, having a selective picture of the probability of violence might systematically overestimate actual incidents. This overestimation could lead to higher punitiveness and a greater impact of victimization on this population's punitive attitudes (Kemme & Doering, 2015, p. 550). Furthermore, people with more conservative attitudes have been found to be more punitive (e.g., Kury & Obergfell-Fuchs, 2008b; Simmler et al., 2017, p. 14ff). Police officers tend to be more conservative than the average population, particularly on topics of law and order (Fielding & Fielding, 1991, p. 51ff; Furnham & Alison, 1994, p. 36; Crow, O'Connor Shelley, Bedard, & Gertz, 2004, p. 597; Chen & Einat, 2015, cf. about this research and with further references; Ellrich, 2012, p. 2ff, 2016b, p. 4).

Additionally, research has established that police officers tend to explain delinquency by emphasizing individual rather than social aspects (Fielding & Fielding, 1991; Sims, 2003; Ellrich, 2016b, p. 4). This tendency is relevant to the present study, since attributing delinquency to personal choice is related to punitive attitudes through the promotion of harsher punishment (Mohr & Luscri, 1995; Ellrich, 2016b, p. 4). Approval of classical theories focusing on offenders who rationally engage in crime as a consequence of individual characteristics and free will has also been found to be a strong predictor of harsh punitive attitudes (Evans & Adams, 2003; Sims, 2003; Chen & Einat, 2015, p. 172). Therefore, different explanations for criminal behaviour are associated with different opinions on punishment (Sims, 2003; Chen & Einat, 2015, p. 172). Although the current study's design did not allow for consideration of all of these potentially influential factors, these findings are taken into consideration in the discussion of the results.

With respect to differences in punitiveness among police officers, research has suggested certain demographic variables to be of particular importance. Male police officers were generally found to hold more punitive attitudes than their female counterparts (Kury et al., 2009; Ellrich, 2012, p. 12; Chen & Einat, 2015; Chen, 2016; Ellrich, 2016b, p. 8), although multivariate results yielded no significant gender differences (Ellrich, 2016b, p. 13). In the general population, females tend to be less punitive than males (e.g., Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Ven, 2000; Baker, Lambert, & Jenkins, 2005; Kühnrich & Kania, 2005, p. 24; Ellrich, 2012, p. 12). However, gender-based differences in attitudes towards crime and punishment appear to be marginal (Furnham & Alison, 1994, p. 39; Hartnagel & Templeton, 2008, p. 363).

Older, more educated, non-patrol police officers reported lesser punitive attitudes, but age was a more important factor than either gender or education (Ellrich, 2016b, p. 8ff). However, one study found no significant differences among age groups (e.g., Chen & Einat, 2015). For the general population, the relevance of age as an influencing factor on punitiveness remains unclear; some studies found older people to be more punitive than younger ones (e.g., Windzio et al., 2007, p. 40), while other studies observed a correlation in the opposite direction (e.g., Kühnrich & Kania, 2005, p. 24; Kury & Obergfell-Fuchs, 2008b, p. 296) or that age had no significant impact at all (e.g., Hartnagel & Templeton, 2008, p. 363). These variances can partly be explained by different methods of measurement. With regards to direct comparisons, Ellrich (2012, p. 12) found that punitiveness among police officers decreased throughout life, but this was not the case for the general population. On average, older officers were shown to be less punitive than the greater population (Ellrich, 2012, p. 13).

In response to this last, most closely comparable study, and following the above-mentioned probable connection between potential victimization exposure and punitiveness, it was hypothesised in the conducted research that:

- (H₁) older police officers would show decreasing levels of punitiveness;
- (H₂) no significant gender differences among the participants would be found;
- (H₃) employees with patrol duty would hold harsher, more punitive attitudes.

Hypotheses regarding the relationship between victimization and punitive attitudes

General correlation between victimization and punitive attitudes

At first, the connection between personally experienced victimization and punitive attitudes seems obvious (Ellrich, 2016b, p. 1). Kemme and Doering (2015, p. 549) suggested different ways of explaining this finding. One explanation considers the extent, nature, and frequency of victimization to influence opinions regarding adequate punishment because victims tend to demand more severe and longer penalties out of personally motivated desires for revenge. Another is that victimization experiences cause personal feelings of security to erode, and therefore increase one's fear of crime. This increase in fear is followed by an augmented call for harsher punishment. The authors stated, however, that even though both explanations seem to support a correlation, the various forms of punitiveness and victimization result in a complexity that cannot be ignored when discussing the study's results (Kemme & Doering, 2015, p. 549). It is plausible that what, if any, correlation exists may depend on the severity and nature of the experienced incidents. It has to be noted, however, that the relationship of punitive attitudes and fear of crime remains also unclear (Chiricos, Welch, & Gertz, 2004). Certainly, such interrelations seem intuitively convincing, since victimization is likely to affect one's personal attitudes about a number of things, at least in the short term.

However, the theoretical hypothesis that personally experienced victimization and the accompanying emotions are reflected in harsher punitive attitudes has not been consistently empirically confirmed (Ellrich, 2012, p. 4). Internationally, the research on this topic has not – despite general assumptions – offered clear proof or even support of the notion that victimization has a significant impact on punitiveness (e.g., Unnever, Cullen, & Fisher, 2007; Hartnagel & Templeton, 2008, p. 365; Hirtenlehner, 2008; King & Maruna, 2009; Adriaenssen & Aertsen, 2015, p. 102; Kemme & Doering, 2015, p. 552). A multi-level analysis of the International Crime Victim Survey (ICVS) data obtained from 23 Western countries could not establish any correlation, and instead revealed that victims of burglary did not necessarily wish perpetrators to be imprisoned (van Kesteren, 2009, p. 36). A modest correlation was found in an analysis of an earlier ICVS sweep (van Kesteren, Mayhew, & Nieuwbeerta, 2000, p. 88). A great number of other studies found either no or very little connection, and in some cases even an opposite correlation between victimization and punitiveness (van Kesteren, 2009, p. 36). Only a few studies have established a correlation between direct or indirect impacts of victimization and punitive attitudes (Keil & Vito, 1991; Kury & Obergfell-Fuchs, 2008a). Therefore, victimization incidents are in general not regarded as reliable indicators of punitive attitudes (Kemme & Doering, 2015, p. 555). In summary, it remains unclear if negative, crime-related experiences actually cause a change in punitive perceptions, though these experiences are presumed to cause a desire for punishment (King & Maruna, 2009; Hirtenlehner, 2011, p. 30; Ellrich, 2016b, p. 1).

There are certain limitations that must be considered when exploring this interrelationship. Investigations may be influenced by whether lifetime prevalence or recent victimization is assessed, since it can be assumed that the effects might be more profound in cases of recent incidents (King & Maruna, 2009, p. 161; Ellrich, 2016b, p. 5). Additionally, any change in punitive attitude may depend on the severity and frequency of the incidents, a factor that is not consistently considered in this type of research (Ellrich, 2016b, p. 5ff). Therefore, the current study accurately differentiates

between levels of victimization-related exposition and offers further insights into potential correlations.

Correlation between police officers' victimization and punitive attitudes

As stated above, the relationship between police officers' victimization and punitiveness has not received significant scholarly attention, though this group's especially high victimization rate certainly invites such an exploration. An exception is the study mentioned earlier in this research that focused on investigating punitiveness among German police officers (Ellrich, 2012, 2016b). Those researchers found that police officers who had been violently attacked within the previous year showed higher levels of punitive attitudes than did non-victims (Ellrich, 2012, 2016b). The analysis differentiated among officers experiencing no violent victimization, those who had been violently victimized but not disabled for more than seven days, and officers suffering more violent incidents (Ellrich et al., 2011, p. 88). The results showed that punitive attitudes were more intense for the second group and even more severe for the third; thus, the authors concluded that the impact on punitiveness depended on the severity of the violent victimization (Ellrich et al., 2011, p. 89ff). Another analysis of the same sample indicated that police officers reporting one incident in the previous year and those reporting at least two were more punitive than their non-victimized colleagues (Ellrich, 2016b, p. 10). Again, frequency was found to be a relevant correlate, as participants with several incidents reported significantly higher levels of punitiveness (Ellrich, 2016b, p. 10). However, although the correlation was statistically significant, the effects of victimization on punitiveness were rather small; only 1.7% of the variance could be explained by victimization experiences (Ellrich, 2016b, p. 10).

Since these findings suggest correlations between punitiveness and both victimization and the number of violent incidents, it must be determined if the detected effect is caused by one variable influencing another as the relationship could be bidirectional. The just discussed research suggests that prior victimization experiences may influence punitive attitudes. However, the converse could also be true as the level of punitiveness may increase the risk of victimization due to changes in the officer's treatment of civilians (Ellrich, 2016b, p. 13), as well as other negative aspects of the officer's conduct, such as the unnecessary use of force (Ellrich, 2016b, p. 1). Officers holding more punitive attitudes may initially act differently and therefore could provoke certain behaviours in others. Already high levels of punitiveness could then serve to increase the likelihood of victimization. There is empirical evidence for the assumption that police officers are not only 'passive recipients of violent circumstances' but also that the incidents can be the result of an 'interactive process' (Ellrich, 2016a, p. 661; Ellrich & Baier, 2016, p. 7). The behaviours of both officers and civilians during such encounters are often responses to the comments and actions of the other actor (Alpert et al., 2004, p. 475). Police officers with aggressive reactions were found to be more likely to report violent victimization (van Reemst et al., 2015). Officers operating strictly according to the rules and in a dominant way as well as police officers acting 'overly friendly' were found to experience more victimization (van Reemst et al., 2015, p. 637).

One of the rare studies on police officers' punitive attitudes and their disposition towards abusive use of force did find a correlation between higher levels of punitiveness and readiness for assault, though the correlation was found to be minimal (Bosold, 2006, p. 128). Further analysis found that punitive attitudes have a significant impact on police officers' tendency to engage in violent behaviour (Bosold, 2006, p. 129). In that sense, it may not only be the case that victimization is an indicator of higher levels of punitiveness, but also that the latter might be a predictor of an increased risk of victimization. Thus, these possible correlations and their respective directions are highly relevant and their consideration in this context essential. In line with these findings, the current research tests the following hypotheses (although not being able to explore the direction of the influence):

- (H_4) officers who have personally experienced victimization hold harsher punitive attitudes, and
- (H_5) this correlation becomes intensified the more officers experience such incidents and the more severe those incidents are.

Method

Procedure

The data were collected via a victimization study of police officers in the canton of St. Gallen. St. Gallen is a German-speaking canton in eastern Switzerland, with approximately 500,000 inhabitants. It mainly consists of rural areas, with the exception of the capital, St. Gallen. In the spring and autumn of 2016, two police corps (for the city and canton of St. Gallen) were asked to complete an anonymous online survey. In total, 928 police officers were contacted and 478 participated, producing a response rate of 51.5%. The study was designed to reveal the dimensions of violent and non-violent assaults on police officers for the preceding three years. The concrete situational circumstances of the offenses and characteristics of both offenders and victims were collected. The survey also addressed the punitive attitudes of officers, and thus allowed for the current study of this under-researched relationship. After acquiring the standard victimization data, the questionnaire addressed several items regarding punitiveness. Additionally, demographic and work-related characteristics such as age, gender, and area of service were collected.

Regarding potential biases, self-reported victimization studies carry with them the risk that affected people are potentially more motivated to participate than those who have not suffered such incidents. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that the group of officers who experienced victimization were slightly overrepresented in the sample. Furthermore, the study addressed not only patrol officers but also all other members of the police corps. Hence, employees operating in the back office were not excluded, even though their risk of victimization is smaller, especially with regards to violent victimization. However, back-office personnel participated at a lower rate, and thus were underrepresented in the sample (as compared to their total number in the police corps). Furthermore, the data allowed for the examination of correlations, but did not offer causal explanations for either victimization incidents or punitive attitudes.

Sample

The sample ($N = 478$) consisted of 71 female (14.9%) and 407 male (85.1%) police officers, with an average age of 38.5 years ($SD = 9.9$). On average, the respondents had worked for 13.2 years in their respective corps. Regarding the operating environment, 32 of the officers (6.7%) declared that they worked more than 6 hours per working day on the street (i.e., in patrol service), while 150 (31.4%) stated that they patrolled between 4 and 6 hours per day, 119 (24.9%) between 2 and 4 hours per day, and 113 (26.6%) between 1 and 2 hours per day. Only back-office work was reported by 64 of the surveyed (13.4%). Officers who have indicated to be back-office workers, i.e., to have no patrol duties respectively no direct exposure on the street, were included in the analysis as they have yet contact with potential offenders, for example by phone or when questioning them in the head-quarter. Furthermore, they allow examining to what extent the area of duty has a significant impact onto the examined variables. The described distribution was found for men and women alike. The police officers generally showed relatively high levels of job satisfaction. On a scale from 1 to 10, the self-indicated job satisfaction was, on average, 7.9.

Measures

Punitiveness index

As has been introduced within this article, the concept of punitiveness is used variably in literature. This research based its examination of the relationship between victimization and punitiveness on a relatively wide understanding of the latter. Five items were employed to record opinions regarding the legal setting, the intensity, goal and effect of punishment, and adequate police intervention. This relatively limited number of items of the scale constructed for the purpose of this study demands care when generalizing the results for different dimensions of punitiveness. Due to its design, the present study neither makes absolute statements about punitive attitudes compared to the overall punitiveness of society, nor captures developments or tendencies over time. By examining the relationship between punitive attitudes and the victimization of police staff, this study explores their potential interrelationship. Therefore, it allows assessing the relationship between different levels of punitive attitudes among the investigated population and other correlates.

The participants' punitive attitudes were measured by their responses to five items listed below. Using an answer scale ranging from 1 ('does not apply at all') to 4 ('fully applies'), the officers were asked to assess certain statements and declare their degree of support, with higher values representing greater levels of punitiveness.

Items

- The law prevents the police from intervening with a sufficient level of toughness.
- Punishments and sanctions codified in Swiss criminal law are insufficiently severe.
- It is better to intervene forcefully in low-level offences in order to prevent more severe offences from following.
- Severe penalties are of little benefit. (*Answers oppositely weighted.*)
- It is the job of the police to step in with toughness. Squeamishness is inappropriate in this profession.

Responses to the items were summed and divided by five. The mean of each officer's values for all items defined his or her overall punitiveness index. Therefore, an officer's level of punitiveness could range from one to four. This index was used to further analyse correlations between punitiveness and the other research variables. A reliability analysis was conducted, which showed that the reliability of the scale was adequate for use in this research (Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$).

Level of exposure to victimization

The victimization levels of police officers were captured by inquiring about incidents occurring in the past three years. This timeframe was chosen in order to get valid results regarding more serious and therefore rarer incidents. In detail, the questionnaire asked for: (a) bodily injuries, (b) life-threatening incidents, (c) slight physical violence, (d) verbal threats, and (e) verbal insults. 'Slight physical violence' included assaults not inflicting permanent harm on the body and health of the officer as for example kicking, spitting or punching. Below, the prevalence of these incidents was brought into context with some background variables. To analyse the relationship between an officer's victimization experience and punitive attitude, their overall exposure level to victimization needed to be determined. For that, another index had to be defined that reflected the intensity of the victimization experienced during the reference period. An assumption was made that, for instance, the experience of a minor assault such as verbal abuse would weigh less on an individual's punitive perceptions than a more severe and violent incident resulting in bodily harm. Thus, the exposure level was calculated considering these types of differences.

An officer's answer of 'yes' to the question of whether they had an experience that resulted in bodily injury was rated as five points; this was followed by a life-threatening incident, which was

counted as four points. Slight physical violence was awarded three points and serious verbal threats received two. Verbal insults were awarded one point. Following this approach, the 'exposure level of victimization' roughly mirrored the extent to which an officer was affected over the past three years; the hypothesis was that this condition would directly influence the officer's punitive attitudes. Consequently, an officer with no victimization experience at all had an exposure level of zero. An officer who had experienced all of the possible incidents had a level of 15. Of course, this range of zero to 15 only reflected an estimation of the seriousness of the victimization incidents experienced, but still allowed for a relative assessment and further evaluation of the differences within the study sample.

Analysis

Initially, victimization was explored in detail, examining the number of officers having experienced any form of victimization as well as the incidents mentioned above. Using chi-square tests, possible differences regarding victimization between men and women, different age groups and different amounts of patrol duty were studied. Subsequently, punitiveness was examined. After looking at the overall distribution, again possible differences were investigated using the respectively appropriate procedures: a t-test was conducted concerning differences between men and women, whereas to enlighten the relationship between the officers' age and their punitiveness linear regression was performed. Finally, an ANOVA revealed differences regarding time spent on the street, which were further examined using planned contrasts.

Combining those two focusses, the relationship between victimization and punitiveness was investigated. T-tests inspected the level of punitiveness for officers with and without victimization experience as well as for experiences of different types of victimization. Afterwards, linear regression was conducted to explore the relation between the officers' punitiveness and their level of exposure to victimization.

Ensuing, multivariate analyses were performed, examining the relationship between victimization, punitiveness and other variables such as gender, age and the amount of patrol duty. For reasons of space, only selected results are presented in the following.

Table 1. Three-year victimization experiences.

	Bodily injury	Life-threatening incident	Slight physical violence	Verbal threat	Verbal insult	Overall victimization percentage
Total Sample (N = 478)	21.6%	21.8%	55.6%	47.0%	83.4%	84.4%
<i>Gender</i>						
Male (N = 407)	21.8%	22.3%	58.1%	49.1%	84.0%	85.7%
Female (N = 71)	18.6%	17.1%	37.1%	31.4%	74.3%	77.1%
<i>Significance</i>			.001	.006	.049	
<i>p =</i>						
<i>Age</i>						
21–30 (N = 123)	19.3%	20.5%	68.7%	53.0%	91.6%	92.8%
31–40 (N = 186)	22.1%	26.6%	58.4%	45.5%	89.0%	90.3%
41–50 (N = 97)	15.3%	16.7%	43.1%	36.1%	73.6%	73.6%
51–63 (N = 72)	10.6%	8.5%	31.9%	42.6%	55.3%	61.7%
<i>Significance</i>		.041	.000	.000		
<i>p =</i>						
<i>Patrol duty</i>						
0 hours (N = 64)	6.3%	4.8%	15.9%	28.6%	38.1%	42.9%
1–2 hours (N = 113)	14.4%	18.9%	49.5%	44.1%	80.2%	82.9%
2–4 hours (N = 119)	25.9%	22.4%	64.7%	47.4%	89.7%	91.4%
4–6 hours (N = 150)	28.6%	31.3%	69.4%	55.8%	98.0%	98.4%
> 6 hours (N = 32)	25.0%	15.6%	50.0%	43.8%	81.3%	81.3%
<i>Significance</i>	.001	.001	.000	.009	.000	
<i>p =</i>						

Table 2. Punitiveness index: demographics, means (M), and standard deviations (SD).

	M	SD	p
Total Sample (N = 341) ¹	1.98	0.51	
<i>Gender</i>			.072
Male (N = 288)	2.00	0.51	
Female (N = 53)	1.86	0.45	
<i>Age</i>			.000
21–30 (N = 83)	1.81	0.44	.001
31–40 (N = 137)	1.96	0.44	.017
41–50 (N = 65)	1.99	0.57	.011
51–63 (N = 56)	2.26	0.56	
<i>Patrol duty</i>			.002
0 hours (N = 49)	2.21	0.59	.006
1–2 hours (N = 82)	2.06	0.49	.130
2–4 hours (N = 84)	1.89	0.46	.769
4–6 hours (N = 101)	1.90	0.47	.857
>6 hours (N = 25)	1.89	0.52	

Results

Victimization: prevalence and correlations

As Table 1 reveals, the great majority (84.4%) of the respondents experienced victimization in the three years prior to the survey; less severe incidents were more frequent. With respect to general victimization, male officers experienced victimization at rates higher than their female colleagues. As can be seen in Table 1, the percentage of men exposed to specific behaviours was higher for each of the different categories of victimization. These differences proved to be significant for ‘slight physical violence,’ ‘verbal threats,’ and ‘verbal insults,’ whereas for ‘life-threatening incidents’ and ‘bodily injury,’ no significant effects from gender could be found. As a general trend, the victimization risk was higher for younger officers; this was true for all offence categories. The overall exposure level of victimization decreased from 92.8% for officers between 21 and 30 years of age, to 61.7% for those aged 51 to 63 years. Again, several of the differences detected were significant, including ‘life-threatening incident,’ ‘slight physical violence,’ and ‘verbal threats.’

Concerning hours spent on the street on patrol duty (and thus, exposed to potential offenders), differences were found to be significant for all offense categories (see Table 1). There was a decrease in victimization from the group spending four to six hours a day on patrol (98.4%) to the group spending more than six hours on the street per day (81.3%). This can be attributed to the fact that the latter group was very small (N = 32).

Punitiveness among police officers

In the next step of the current research, the above-mentioned punitiveness index was calculated and put into context with other variables in order to shed light on the prevalent punitive attitudes among the surveyed officers, as well as the factors determining those attitudes (see Table 2). The punitiveness index was determined to be normally distributed with a mean of 1.98, $SD = 0.51$.

Men showed higher punitiveness scores ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 0.51$) than did women ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.45$), but this effect was not found to be statistically significant. Punitiveness generally increased with age, ranging from $M = 1.81$ ($SD = 0.44$) among 21 to 30 year olds to $M = 2.26$ ($SD = 0.56$) for officers between the ages of 51 and 63. This effect proved to be significant.

Concerning the number of hours per day on patrol, a decrease in punitiveness could be detected from $M = 2.21$ ($SD = 0.59$) for back-office staff to $M = 1.89$ ($SD = 0.52$) for officers spending more than 6 hours a day on the street. An ANOVA test was conducted that showed a significant effect between the number of hours spent on the street and the punitiveness level. Planned contrasts revealed that being employed as back-office staff significantly increased punitiveness as compared to

any number of hours spent on patrol. In order to test the stability of this effect, an independent t-test was conducted after separating the group of back-office employees from the officers who spent some amount of time on the street. The difference in punitiveness proved to be significant: $t(339) = 3.48$, $p = .001$. Ensuing, Cohen's d was calculated, showing a medium effect size ($d = .50$).

After analysing the data, H_1 stating that older police officers would show decreasing levels of punitiveness had to be rejected, since punitiveness significantly increased with the age of the officers. Conversely, H_2 was confirmed because as has been hypothesised no statistically significant gender differences were found. Surprisingly, hours spent working on the street seemed to decrease punitiveness, a finding that was not expected and served to rebut H_3 , which had proposed that employees with patrol duty would hold harsher, more punitive attitudes. However, this effect appeared only when comparing back-office staff to other groups with actual patrol duty.

Interrelationship of punitiveness and victimization

As a further step, the hypothesized interrelationship between punitiveness and victimization was examined by means of an independent t-test, $t(83,96) = -2.99$, $p = .004$, $d = -0.44$. As a result, the mean levels of punitiveness were found to be significantly higher for police officers without any victimization experience ($M = 2.17$, $SD = 0.61$) than for victimized officers ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 0.47$). A similar pattern was detected when comparing victimization experience separately for the five offence categories. With the exception of the category of 'bodily injury,' victims of the corresponding offence showed statistically significantly lower levels of punitiveness (see Table 3). As this negative correlation was not only contrary to H_4 suggesting that officers who have personally experienced victimization hold harsher punitive attitudes, but also to previous studies (see Section 2), this result prompted further analysis.

The offences differed considerably in their gravity, ranging from uncomfortable but rather minor incidents like verbal insults to assaults resulting in bodily injury. It was assumed that the officers' levels of punitiveness might differ depending on if they were exposed only to one offence or several. In order to accommodate different possible impacts resulting from a variety of severity levels and accumulation of offences, the above-described 'exposure level of victimization' was calculated to serve as a measurement device. The effect this exposure level had on punitiveness was determined using linear regression. The results show a significant effect, $(F(1, 339) = 8.02, p = .005)$. A beta value of $b = -.018$ indicated that with an increasing level of victimization, the individual's punitiveness decreased. Therefore, H_5 proposing that the correlation of personally experienced violence and punitive attitudes becomes intensified the more officers experience such incidents and the more severe those incidents are was disproved, since the level of exposure to victimization was not found to intensify punitive attitudes. However, similar to the results of former studies, victimization only accounted for 2.3% of the variance in punitiveness, and thus had only a small effect.

Multivariate analysis: victimization, punitive attitudes, and patrol duty

Since victimization and the amount of patrol duty an officer has on an average day have both been shown to significantly influence the level of punitiveness, multivariate procedures were conducted

Table 3. Punitiveness by victimization experience ($N = 341$)².

	Bodily injury	Life-threatening incident	Slight physical violence	Verbal threat	Verbal insult	Any type of experience
<i>Experience</i>						
Yes	1.95 (N = 59)	1.85 (N = 56)	1.91 (N = 171)	1.89 (N = 138)	1.93 (N = 266)	1.93 (N = 275)
No	1.99 (N = 282)	2.00 (N = 285)	2.05 (N = 170)	2.05 (N = 203)	2.16 (N = 75)	2.17 (N = 66)
<i>Significance</i>						
$p =$	.620	.037	.013	.003	.003	.004

Figure 1. Relation between victimization, patrol duty, and punitiveness.

to study possible interactions. An independent factorial ANOVA examined the relationships among being victimized in the preceding three years, the number of hours spent on daily patrol duty, and the individual's level of punitiveness. In this model, having been victimized proved to have a significant negative effect ($F(1, 329) = 6.24, p = .013$), whereas a significant effect was not found for either patrol duty ($F(5, 329) = 1.35, p = .245$) or the interaction of the two variables ($F(5, 329) = 1.16, p = .326$). Nevertheless, this interaction proved to be very interesting, as the following Figure illustrates. While officers experiencing victimization tended to become less punitive after spending more work time on the street, this effect was reversed for people who had not been victimized (see Figure 1).

Due to these surprising results, not only did the hypothesis that personal victimization experiences lead to increased punitiveness have to be rejected, but it was determined that victimization actually negatively correlated with punitiveness. Thus, police officers who have been victimized were less punitive than their non-victimized counterparts. This effect was not distorted by the amount of patrol duty, but rather exhibited an interesting relation, although concerning this interaction only a non-significant tendency could be detected.

Discussion

This research brought along interesting findings regarding the officers' victimization, their punitive attitudes and the relationship between these two variables.

With regards to general victimization, more time spent on daily patrol duty seemed to increase the risk of victimization; an almost linear connection was found in the data. Concerning all categories, male officers reported higher levels of victimization than did their female colleagues, with some offence categories showing significant differences. Although these results are relatively ambiguous concerning gender differences, existing studies have already indicated the tendency of males being more at risk (Bragason, 2006, p. 6; Ellrich et al., 2012, p. 29 and 127; Baier and Ellrich, 2014, p. 110; Covington et al., 2014).

Age was found to be of high importance, as indicated by young officers' victimization rates being 30% higher than those of their older colleagues. As with gender, situational explanations seem to be the most likely. Younger officers are often employed in tasks different from those of their older

colleagues, and spend more time on the street and in conflict-based situations (cf. Manzoni, 2003, p. 110; Ellrich et al., 2012, p. 24). This hypothesis is confirmed by our data, since the number of officers not serving on the street increased with age, suggesting an interrelationship between the two variables. Additionally, older and more experienced officers may deal with difficult situations in more sophisticated ways and generally be more qualified in terms of assessing risky constellations, which may reduce victimization (Ellrich et al., 2012, p. 24). Thus, not only attitudinal changes may be a central explanation at hand but additionally specific job skills that may be more pronounced among officers with more experience. Communication and de-escalation skills may in particular affect victimization rates as well as the severity of victimization.

Punitiveness was normally distributed across the examined group. This was surprising, since punitiveness studies focusing on other population groups have found that small groups of 'extreme punitive' participants distorted means (e.g., Kuhn, Jayet, & Villettaz, 2001, p. 28, dealing with concretely proposed sanctions; Kuhn & Vuille, 2010, p. 105). However, this high variance in punitiveness within a particular group was less pronounced in certain cases, such as judges when compared to students, indicating a 'professionalization effect' resulting from dealing with crime professionally and having a comparably advanced education in matters of criminal justice (Simmler et al., 2017, p. 11). Therefore, it seems plausible that the normal distribution in the current research speaks to such a professionalization and thus reduces the prevalence of these 'extreme positions'.

With regards to demographic variables, no significant gender differences were detected, which confirmed H_2 . Nevertheless, men did show a tendency towards higher punitiveness than did women. Furthermore, punitiveness increased with age, displaying a significant difference and disproving H_1 . This latter hypothesis was proposed in response to the results of a recent study that explored the opposite effect (Ellrich, 2012, p. 12). Older participants in the current research held harsher punitive attitudes, which can probably be explained by more generally conservative perceptions. Since the overall influence of age on punitiveness for the entire population, as well as for police officers, showed very different outcomes (see Section 2), possible explanations are not immediately obvious. However, spending more time on patrol impacted punitiveness only in people who had not previously been victimized. Thus, this age effect cannot simply be explained by a probably less intensified exposition of older officers.

The increase in punitiveness with age is especially surprising when considering the 'professionalization effect.' As the results of this research reveal, experiences with victimization and exposition on the street do not, contrary to expectations, lead to higher degrees of punitiveness; instead, the opposite is the case. As with victimization, the extent of patrol duty showed a significant influence on punitiveness, but again in an unexpected way. While back-office staff expressed high levels of punitiveness, an almost constant decrease was observed as time on the streets increased, this effect being of medium strength. Therefore, H_3 was shown to be false. This could be explained by these officers dealing more often with sensitive, conflict-based, dangerous situations, and thus becoming better able to obtain deeper insights into the reality of their work and criminal justice in general, with the result being a more differentiated and sophisticated view of crime and offenders. Conversely, it might not be professionalization or familiarization that explains these effects, but rather a disillusionment with the reality of police work and a loss of trust in the benefit of punitive measures. Further research is needed to examine these and other possible causes for the effects detected here.

Subsequently, victimization, punitiveness and their suspected interrelation were further examined. One surprising result was that officers who had not been victimized showed significantly higher levels of punitiveness than their victimized colleagues, revealing a medium effect size. This pattern was detected in all five offence categories. Since it can be hypothesized that having experienced an event that resulted in bodily injury might have a more serious impact than something like verbal abuse, it was essential that the exposure levels of victimization be calculated. The unexpected effects were confirmed: As the exposure level increased punitiveness decreased, both when considering all categories of offences and when only including bodily offences. Finally, the

two main variables and amount of patrol duty were integrated via a multivariate procedure. Although not all of the effects turned out to be significant, another unforeseen trend emerged. Officers experiencing victimization in the three years prior to the survey tended to become less punitive the more time they spent on the street. This trend was inverted for participants without victimization experience. Their level of punitiveness rather heightened as their patrol duty increased. These interrelationships are very interesting. If we follow our suggestions of potential professionalization/familiarization versus a disillusionment effect, it is difficult to explain why non-victims' experience of patrol duty comparatively resulted in such a contrast. However, the general familiarization effect generated by victimization experiences might intensify with more time spent on patrol duty and the exposure to offences and offenders becomes more commonplace. The more insight into actual crime settings and offender histories that is gained, the more understanding could be developed, leading to a decreased level of punitiveness. Conversely, non-victims may be more influenced by public opinion than by personal experience, which could explain why the effect is not prevalent in this group. Regardless, these results demand further research considering especially that the interaction only represented a tendency.

Thus, these findings indicate that contrary to our original hypotheses (H_4 and H_5), punitiveness is not a consequence of personal victimization experience, as officers who were victimized in the previous three years tended to be less punitive. Experiencing more severe incidents and being victimized numerous times did not positively correlate with punitiveness; rather, the reverse was true. Therefore, personal victimization experience either has no impact on punitiveness (which could be shaped indirectly by accompanying variables) or it leads to less-pronounced punitive attitudes through certain directly-related mechanisms. Harsh punitive attitudes are, however, not a logical result of bad personal experiences.

Conclusion

This research was based on a survey of police officers in eastern Switzerland. It demonstrated that police officers' victimization experiences correlated strongly with the number of hours spent on patrol. Victimization was also found to be dependent on gender with male officers experiencing higher rates of victimization than their female counterparts, and age with younger officers more frequently victimized than their older colleagues. However, time spent on patrol also correlated with age, and thus the higher victimization rates for young officers might partially be explained by exposure time on the street.

When victimization was evaluated as an explanatory variable, we found the surprising result that victimized officers tended to be less punitive than their colleagues who had no experience with victimization. Also, officers who had been victimized in the three years prior to the survey showed a tendency to become less punitive the more time they spent on the street, while the opposite appeared to be true for their non-victimized counterparts. Thus, victimization does not seem to influence punitiveness among police officers, a finding that was unexpected and *a priori* counter-intuitive. A possible professionalization effect could be one explanation for this finding; police officers with heavy patrol loads may face greater exposure to offences and offenders, and thus might develop a more in-depth understanding of these situations and the personal circumstances of crime. It could also be that punitiveness is not significantly influenced by personal experience, but to a certain degree by a predetermined mindset, and that indirect exposure to victimization experiences (i.e., through reports by work colleagues) might confirm and strengthen this mindset far more effectively than first-hand victimization experience.

One limitation of this research is that it could not measure the causal effects between victimization and punitive attitudes. Officers were queried about any victimization that took place in the three years prior to being surveyed, but they were not asked about their degrees of punitiveness before they became victims. Therefore, it cannot be excluded that punitiveness among the victimized officers was even lower before victimization and increased subsequently. Victimized police

officers reporting significantly lower levels of punitiveness is, nevertheless, a strong indicator that victimization does not increase punitive attitudes in victimized officers, at least in any significant ways. Based on the findings of this research, a longitudinal study would be required to know more about the development of punitive attitudes and identify the impacts of victimization on punitiveness. Additionally, this study was based solely on a survey of officers in the canton of St. Gallen, and thus any extrapolation to other Swiss cantons or internationally should be done with caution. To validate these findings, a replication of this study in another Swiss or international context would be necessary.

Yet, the findings of this study can serve not only as a basis for further research, but also as inputs for police work and police training. The study suggests that victimization does not automatically lead to harsher punitive attitudes. Rather, victimization experiences may even serve as a departure point for further professionalization, since the capability of dealing with such negative incidents in an adequate way could be at the origin of personal growth and professional sophistication of officers. Accordingly, victimization experiences and their personal management should be subject of general police education and training. Also, victimized officers should be accompanied adequately in order to not only process the incidents, but also use them as an opportunity for personal and professional development. This approach might not only reduce the future risk of victimization, but could also help to increase the professional skills of the police officers.

Notes

1. Since 137 participants did not state opinions, these data were missing; this led to a total sample size of 341.
2. Again, since 137 participants did not give their opinion, the sample size for these calculations was 341.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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