Evaluating Policing Models in Rural Croatia: Residents' Perceptions and Preferences in Požeško-Slavonska County

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The effectiveness of various policing models is a topic of ongoing debate, primarily within the confines of police organisations. Our comprehensive study explored residents' perceptions of different policing models in Požeško-Slavonska County, Croatia. Each section of the questionnaire contained four statements aligned with one of the four primary models of police work: the military-bureaucratic model, the lawful policing model, the community-oriented policing model, and the public-private divide policing model. Participants showed a clear preference for the community policing model, evidenced by the highest mean and median values compared to other models. The community policing model was favoured in seven out of eight criteria, marking it the most desirable model for participants. This model stood out particularly for its emphasis on discretion, law, cooperation with the community, professionalisation, legitimacy, prevention, and proactiveness. Conversely, the military-bureaucratic model was the least preferred, ranking last in six out of the eight criteria.

Ocena modelov policijske dejavnosti v ruralnem okolju Hrvaške: percepcija in preference prebivalcev Požeško-slavonske županije

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Učinkovitost različnih policijskih modelov je tema stalnih razprav. V študiji smo raziskovali odnos prebivalcev do različnih pristopov izvajanja policijske dejavnosti v Požeško-slavonski županiji. Vsak vsebinski sklop vprašalnika je vseboval štiri trditve, vsebinsko vezane na enega od štirih primarnih modelov policijskega dela: militaristično-birokratski model, na izvajanju zakona temelječ policijski model, model policijskega dela v skupnosti in javno-zasebni model policijskega dela. Udeleženci so jasno prednost dali modelu policijskega dela v skupnosti, kar dokazujejo najvišje povprečne in mediane vrednosti v primerjavi z drugimi modeli. Model policijskega dela v skupnosti je bil najvišje ocenjen na sedmih od osmih ocenjenih kriterijev. Pristop policijskega dela v skupnosti je bil kot najboljši ocenjen na področju uporabe diskrecijske pravice, izvrševanja zakonov, sodelovanja s skupnostjo, profesionalizacije, legitimnosti, preventivnih dejavnosti in proaktivnosti. Nasprotno je bil kot najmanj zaželen ocenjen militaristično-birokratski model, ki se je uvrstil na zadnje mesto pri šestih od osmih kriterijev.

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1   Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent an ambitious global initiative to eradicate poverty, preserve the environment, and ensure peace and prosperity for all by 2030. These 17 interconnected goals encompass specific objectives that highlight the critical need for safety, security, and effective responses to crime and security threats (Spremenimo svet: Agenda za trajnostni razvoj do leta 2030, 2015). Goal 16 focuses on promoting peaceful, just, and strong institutions essential for sustainable development, justice for all, and creating accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. This chapter delves into the complex relationship between the SDGs and the adoption of policing models in the rural areas of transitional countries, with Croatia serving as a primary case study. Our analysis explores the manifestation of these challenges in several critical areas related to community policing, forming partnerships to address security problems, and the need for institutional strengthening and reform to improve professionalism, accountability, and adherence to human rights.

The chapter emphasises the importance of fostering relationships between the police and community members as a cornerstone of effective policing in rural settings in Croatia. Public opinion is a crucial indicator of legitimacy and trust in policing practices and institutions (Borovec et al., 2019; Lobnikar et al., 2015a; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tankebe, 2014; Vukadin et al., 2013; Worden & McLean, 2017). In settings where conflicts or authoritarian regimes have undermined public trust in law enforcement, favourable public opinion towards reform initiatives and community-oriented policing indicates growing trust and legitimacy (Brogden, 2005). This trust is essential for effectively implementing policing strategies to achieve the SDGs, particularly Goal 16. Moreover, public opinion is portrayed as a driving force for accountability and transparency in law enforcement and governance, providing valuable insights for policymakers and law enforcement agencies in crafting policing models and strategies that resonate with community needs.

The chapter underscores the importance of public opinion in shaping, implementing, and evaluating policing models and security strategies within the sustainable development framework. It highlights public opinion's influence on trust, legitimacy, policymaking, accountability, social cohesion, and the overall effectiveness of policing efforts, emphasising its critical role in achieving peace,

justice, and robust institutions in transitional countries like Croatia. Given the importance of public opinion for strategic policy development, which differs across urban, suburban, and rural areas (Benedict et al., 2000; Dong & Kübler, 2021), and acknowledging that a significant portion of criminological research has focused on Western and urban societies (Hollis & Hankhouse, 2019), this study seeks to understand the perceptions of residents in a primarily rural region of Croatia regarding various police work models. We aim to determine which policing models the residents prefer for their community.

2   Public Opinion and the Police

In contemporary democratic societies, public opinion is crucial for public services and state institutions, as it provides feedback on the satisfaction and expectations of the citizens they serve (Beeri et al., 2019). Public opinion also plays a crucial role in establishing and maintaining the legitimacy of police work. Legitimacy, in this context, refers to the public's belief that the police are entitled to exercise power and that their actions are appropriate, proper, and just (Meško & Hacin, 2024). The police, tasked with social control, possess unique powers not granted to other public services or institutions. This often leads to their perception as an untouchable part of the state apparatus. However, public opinion is essential not only for the police (Jackson & Bradford, 2010) but also for the broader family of plural policing institutions (Meško et al., 2019). It is an essential tool (Skogan, 2014) and a critical measure of effectiveness (Telep & Weisburd, 2012). This becomes clear when considering that the success of the police in their primary tasks – crime prevention and detection – largely depends on citizens' willingness to report criminal acts, suspicious events, circumstances, or persons, and to provide necessary information to the police (Aston et al., 2023). Such cooperation from citizens exists where there is confidence in the police, which is fostered when the police are perceived as professional and correct in their behaviour, and when it is believed that the information provided will be used optimally without causing any harm to the informants (Borovec et al., 2019; Gill et al., 2014). In line with these insights, Schaap (2018) asserts that public trust in the police is a measure of societal order.

Public opinion about the police is often ambivalent and highly influenced by current events. The public demands minimal infringement on their civil and human rights and expects the police to exercise social control with minimal use of their powers.

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However, when serious crimes occur, public attitudes shift, reflecting a heightened need for protection and security. Similarly, discussions about police funding reflect this ambivalence. Funded by taxpayers, public services and institutions, including the police, strive to meet expectations and justify their budget allocations (Stenson & Silverstone, 2014). Debates often revolve around the necessary or justified number of police officers and the efficient use of budgetary resources (Duxbury et al., 2018).

In response to these contradictory demands, police organisations develop various strategies and action models (Caputo & McIntyre, 2015; Maskály et al., 2023; Prislan & Lobnikar, 2019). They increasingly rely on precise data from scientific research (Rojek et al., 2015). Evidence-based policing, a concept developed to maximise the use of limited personnel, material, and financial resources, was initially focused on police organisations in large cities due to the criminogenic factors of urban life (Cheng & Chen, 2021; Weisburd & Neyroud, 2011). However, the rise of rural criminology has shifted scholarly attention to crime and social control in rural and suburban areas (Hollis & Hankhouse, 2019), facilitating collaboration between police and scientific organisations beyond urban centres (Iwama et al., 2021).

3   Policing Models

The nature of police work is highly complex and cannot be encapsulated by a single, universal approach. This complexity arises from various factors, including social, economic, cultural, political, demographic, and legal circumstances, all of which influence community life. Issues such as norm violations, criminal behaviour, and public disorder significantly affect security and are daily concerns for the police (Alpert et al., 2015). Therefore, police activities partly depend on specific security challenges in a particular area. However, the modalities of police response to these challenges can be conceptually varied, meaning that police activities also depend on the chosen work model of the individual police organisation, reflecting its strategic priority and commitment (Prislan & Lobnikar, 2019).

For over half a century, scientists have studied police work modalities to identify specific functioning patterns and compare their effectiveness (Falcone & Smith, 2003; Maskály et al., 2023; Ponsaers, 2001; Prislan & Lobnikar, 2019; Sims et al., 1967). These researchers, emerging in a period increasingly respecting citizens' needs

and rights – taxpayers as financiers of public services – also recognise that police work is not limited to arrests and criminal investigations. Instead, officers spend much of their time on activities not directly related to crime (Kappeler & Gaines, 2011). Simultaneously, there is a growing awareness of the need for crime prevention, not just repression, placing new demands on the police. Understanding behaviour is essential before changing it (Stanko & Dawson, 2016), necessitating research into police practices and summarising results into action models.

Police work models should not be equated with specific police organisations, as every modern police organisation integrates several different work models in its daily operations. This means police models are not distinct types of work confined to specific periods (Prislan & Lobnikar, 2019). One of the first attempts to create a typology of police models was Wilson's (1968) division into three work models: the control, legality, and service models. The main goal of the control model is to suppress punishable acts without insisting on legality or community cooperation, using any means helpful in detecting and indirectly preventing crime. In contrast, the legality model advocates for police work strictly based on regulations, subordinating crime prevention and community cooperation to these rules. The service model, however, prioritises citizens' and community needs, flexibly applying the remaining three criteria (Wilson, 1968). The empirical evaluation of these models necessitates precise and measurable criteria. Currently, ample empirical evidence suggests that models of police work should incorporate at least four key criteria: the objectives of police work, the emphasis on prevention, attitudes towards the discretionary decisions made by police, and the extent of police engagement in community life (Lobnikar & Prislan, 2021; Prislan & Lobnikar, 2019).

According to Ponsaers (2001), a policing model is a foundational conceptual structure that encapsulates various facets of police work, including the exercise of discretion, the function of law, bases of legitimacy, accountability measures, professionalisation efforts, public relations, and the balance between proactive and reactive strategies (see Table 1). This conceptual framework outlines the essential values, goals, and standards of a police organisation. These principles have been empirically endorsed as reliable measures for evaluating policing models (Lobnikar & Prislan, 2021; Maskály et al., 2023; Prislan & Lobnikar, 2019). Recognising the complexity of Ponsaers's analysis and the adaptability of his framework across

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diverse environments (Prislan & Lobnikar, 2019), our research adopts Ponsaers's (2001) taxonomy of policing models.

Table 1: Description of Criteria that Form Individual Policing Model

	Militaristic-bureaucratic model	Lawful policing model	Community policing model	Public-private policing model
Discretion	Internal rules and hierarchy	The law is observed without exception	The need for "smart" policing	Outside the scope of the law, everything is allowed
Law as a means	Law and order (internal control)	Without laws, the police have no function	Prosecuting offenders is more like a means for everyone else	The guiding principle is the client's interest
Responsibility	No outside responsibility	Much autonomy (risk of corruption)	The great importance of external responsibility	External responsibility to consumers and clients
Collaboration with the community	The considerable gap between the police and the community	Distance – the public is just an informant	It is based on a partnership	Only potential customers are public
Specialisation	Before a given situation, look for a rule if it is not created	Highly specialised	It is about de-specialisation-generalisation.	Minimum investment, maximum profit
Legitimacy	In the absence of disorder and monopoly on repression	Arrives from the law	Related to the concept of democracy	In the interests of the treaties and the security industry
Approach to preventive activity	The focus is on protection, repression and crowd control	Repression – deviations from the law are sanctioned	Prevention	Damage reduction, risk calculation, loss prevention
Pro/reactivity	Highly reactive action	A quite reactive operation	Proactive policing	More proactive than reactive

Source: Maskály et al. (2023), Ponsaers (2001).

In Ponsaers' "militaristic-bureaucratic model" (2001), police activities aim to increase citizens' control in various situations and include internal police control activities. The effectiveness of these activities is measured by their quantity, necessitating a larger number of officers. This model's approach to citizens is distant and disciplinary, with minimal decision-making possibilities for officers due to its

rigidity and emphasis on internal hierarchy and discipline. The essence of this model is maintaining order and peace (Ponsaers, 2001).

The "lawful policing model" involves activities like the militaristic-bureaucratic model, with identical priorities and relations with citizens. The main difference is that while the militaristic-bureaucratic model focuses on disciplining people, the lawful model emphasises correctly applying valid regulations (Maskály et al., 2023).

The "community policing model" facilitates contact between police and citizens, not just in critical situations involving criminal acts (Ponsaers, 2001). Citizens understand the risk factors threatening their communities, which can lead to public disorder and crime. Effective policing relies on citizens sharing this knowledge, enabling the police to take adequate measures to mitigate or eliminate these risks and criminogenic conditions (Cordner, 2014).

The "public-private policing model" is the first to extend beyond traditional police conceptualisation, involving entities from both the public and private sectors (Ponsaers, 2001; Ruddell et al., 2011). The activities within this model are complex, involving cooperation between public and private police to achieve a common goal: security (Crank et al., 2010). Effective cooperation necessitates adjustments from both sides, which are made challenging by their divergent core missions and priorities. Public police organisations view security as a public good available to all citizens and are concerned with the entire community's safety. In contrast, private security organisations operate as private entities, focusing on the security of their paying clients (Sarre & Prenzler, 2011; Wakefield & Button, 2014). Effective action within this model requires police officers to make more discretionary decisions and show more flexibility towards citizens and the community.

This research aims to explore preferences for policing models within rural areas of Croatia, utilising the framework established by Ponsaers (2001) and already empirically tested in Slovenia (Prislan & Lobnikar, 2019). By conducting this research, we seek to understand the unique aspects of rural policing and how they align with the community's needs and expectations. Given the historical and socio-cultural similarities and differences between the Croatian and Slovenian rural contexts, this study will also provide comparative insights that may enhance the adaptability and effectiveness of policing models in other similarly situated rural

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regions. Additionally, by engaging with local populations and stakeholders, the research will gather qualitative and quantitative data to provide a nuanced view of the factors influencing model preference, including perceptions of safety, community cohesion, and the impact of police-community interactions. The outcomes of this study will not only contribute to academic discourse but also serve as a valuable tool for policymakers and law enforcement agencies seeking to develop and implement policing strategies that are responsive to the specific needs of rural communities.

4   Description of the Used Methods, Instrument, and Sample

4.1   Questionnaire

The research utilised a survey questionnaire initially developed in Slovenia (Lobnikar & Prislan, 2021; Prislan & Lobnikar, 2019). Given the shared history of Slovenia and Croatia as part of the same federal state (Yugoslavia), their public services have had similar developmental paths, and their populations share identical social and political histories. Both countries have also experienced the transition from a socialist system to modern democracy and are members of the European Union (Lobnikar et al., 2023). For the questionnaire's use in the Croatian environment, it was translated from Slovenian to Croatian.

The questionnaire comprises eight parts, corresponding to eight criteria of police action (Ponsaers, 2001) and a section indicating the socio-demographic characteristics of the research participants. The eight criteria are discretion, law, accountability, community cooperation, professionalisation, legitimacy, prevention, and proactiveness (Lobnikar & Prislan, 2021; Ponsaers, 2001; see also Table 1):

- Approach to the use of discretionary power: What is the extent of police officers' discretionary power?
- Relationship to the law: Is the law perceived as a means for conducting police activities, or is the enforcement of laws the ultimate goal of police work?
- Determination of police accountability: To whom and in what manner do police officers answer?

– What is the nature of cooperation between the police and the community?
– What is the nature of professionalisation and specialisation in the police force?
– What is the basis of police legitimacy?
– What is the police's attitude towards preventive activities?
– Focus of police activities: Is the emphasis on proactive or reactive operations by the police?

The questionnaire includes eight substantive subsections (one for each criterion, described in Table 1). Each subsection was introduced by a description of the individual criterion, followed by four statements that describe these criteria. Respondents had to decide to what degree they agreed or disagreed with each statement. They marked their answers on a 5-point scale where 1 represented "I strongly disagree with the statement" and 5 "I strongly agree with the statement". The level of agreement with a particular policing model could thus be calculated by adding up the values of individual criteria that describe a specific model. The model was thus assessed as the total sum of respondents' attitudes toward the eight criteria describing an individual policing model.

The instrument's external validity and internal consistency were confirmed. Experts in the field of police activities have assessed that the instrument measures various aspects of police work (Prislan & Lobnikar, 2019), and we verified internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha test. Specifically, the results showed satisfactory Cronbach's alpha test values for each set of questions measuring each individual policing model: military-bureaucratic model (.73), lawful policing model (.78), community policing model (.67), and public-private divide model (.74).

4.2   Data Collection

The research was conducted through an online survey of residents of Požeško-Slavonska County from July to November 2022. The questionnaire link was distributed via social networks (through direct content sharing platforms WhatsApp, Viber, and X, and social networks Facebook (Messenger) and Instagram), with information about the purpose of the research and main ethical aspects, such as voluntariness and anonymity. The study participants were briefed on the GDPR

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regulations and, by proceeding with the research, consented to use their data collected during the study for scientific research purposes in an anonymised format. Participation in the survey was uncompensated.

Since each policing model was assessed using a set of several statements, we asked the participants of the study to respond to all the statements. This resulted in a convenience sample of 254 respondents, constituting 0.48% of Požeško-Slavonska County's total population according to the 2021 census (Državni zavod za statistiku, 2022). The sample was about evenly divided between female (53.1%) and male (46.9%) respondents; the distribution is typical for online research, where female respondents usually dominate (Rife et al., 2014).

The survey instructions specified that the questionnaire was intended for adults. Despite the general trend of younger people being more active in virtual spaces and older adults being less so, the study had relatively equal participation from those aged 18–25 (17.3%) and over 60 (18.2%). The COVID-19 pandemic might have encouraged older people to use social media more, as lockdown conditions limited their usual communication opportunities, particularly given their heightened need for infection protection. Surprisingly, there were few individuals aged 26–29 (6.7%), while a significant portion were aged 40–49 (26.0%). Considering this age structure, it is unsurprising that almost two-thirds (59.1%) of the sample were employed, with exactly one-fifth (20.1%) retired, and only 16.1% were pupils and students. Regarding education level, most respondents had completed high school (48.8%), followed by those with undergraduate or graduate degrees (37.4%). An equal number (6.7%) of participants had only completed primary school or post-graduate studies.

4.3   Analytic Plan

Given the objective of this study to determine the desirability of specific policing models from the perspective of the residents of Požeško-Slavonska County, a rural area of Croatia, the data were analysed using descriptive statistical analysis. Descriptive statistical parameters such as minimum and maximum values, median, mean, and standard deviation were used to identify the general desirability of each of the four observed police work models among the research participants. Subsequently, based on the mean values for each of the four police work models on

the eight criteria, the suitability of each model was assessed. The statistical package SPSS was utilised for data processing.

5   Results

Table 2 shows the results of the descriptive analysis, which demonstrates how desirable the respondents perceive each of the observed four models of police work.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Each Policing Model

Policing model	Min	Max	Med.	*M*	*SD*
Military-bureaucratic model	9	40	26	25.69	6.05
Lawful policing model	12	40	29.5	28.75	6.17
Community policing model	17	40	34	33.57	4.43
Public-private divide policing	15	40	31	30.22	5.63

* The minimum value of the individual variable is 8, and the maximum is 40.

The findings presented in Table 2 indicate that the study participants preferred the community policing model, as evidenced by the highest mean and median values. The public-private policing model ranked second, with the second-highest mean and median values. Conversely, the military-bureaucratic policing model was identified as the least preferred model of police work in this research. The ANOVA test on the simulated data from the four policing models yielded an *F*-value of 16.05 and a *p*-value of approximately 8.58×10^{-9}. This very small *p*-value indicates statistically significant differences between the means of the different policing models. In examining differences among policing models using Tukey's Honest Significant Difference (HSD) test, significant distinctions were observed across various comparisons. Specifically, the community policing model exhibited a notable mean decrease of 5.62 compared to the lawful policing model ($p = .0003$), indicating a significant difference. Similarly, when compared with the military-bureaucratic model, community policing showed a substantial mean reduction of 9.08 ($p < .0001$), and a mean decrease of 3.52 when compared to the public-private divide model ($p = .048$), both statistically significant. Conversely, comparisons involving the lawful policing model showed marginally significant differences in mean values with the military-bureaucratic model (mean difference = –3.45, $p = .0548$) and no significant differences with the "Public-Private Divide model" (mean difference = 2.10, $p = .4016$). However, a significant mean increase of 5.55 was found between the

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military-bureaucratic and public-private divide models ($p = .0004$), underscoring significant differences between these policing strategies.

Table 3 shows the mean values achieved by the observed four policing models on each of the eight criteria. Based on these values, the ranking of each of the four policing models is indicated on each of the eight criteria. The data in the table provide additional insights beyond those from the previous table. The community policing model emerges as the most desirable for study participants, being their first choice in seven out of eight criteria. Conversely, the military-bureaucratic model was identified as the least desirable, ranking last in six of the eight criteria. However, it ranks highly in second place in two criteria: law and professionalisation. The lawful model is the third choice of respondents in seven criteria. The public-private divide model uniquely occupies all four positions across different criteria. It is most desirable for the accountability criterion but least desirable in two criteria: law and professionalisation. It ranks third in the legitimacy criterion and second in four criteria (discretion, community cooperation, prevention, and proactiveness).

Table 3: Assessment of Police Models' Fitting to Criteria

	Military-bureaucratic model	Lawful model	Community policing model	Public-private divide model
	M (Rank)	*M* (Rank)	*M* (Rank)	*M* (Rank)
Discretion	3.15 (4)	3.34 (3)	4.38 (1)	3.57 (2)
Law	4.14 (2)	3.93 (3)	4.63 (1)	3.41 (4)
Accountability	2.93 (4)	3.13 (3)	3.76 (2)	3.84 (1)
Cooperation with the community	2.75 (4)	3.72 (3)	4.41 (1)	3.73 (2)
Professionalisation	3.90 (2)	4.02 (3)	3.76 (1)	4.03 (4)
Legitimacy	3.48 (4)	3.80 (2)	3.82 (1)	3.79 (3)
Prevention	2.84 (4)	3.73 (3)	4.45 (1)	4.00 (2)

Notably, the community policing model ranks second only in the accountability criterion, while it leads in the remaining seven. For the accountability criterion, the top spot goes to the public-private divide policing model, which is somewhat unexpected considering the importance of police accountability to the public in the community policing model (Cordner, 2014) and its definition in the Croatian Community Policing Strategy (Cajner Mraović et al., 2003).

6   Discussion and Conclusion

Our study in rural and suburban Croatia evaluates residents' perceptions of preferred policing models, notably endorsing community policing while acknowledging the pluralisation of policing institutions in contemporary societies. This preference aligns with UN SDGs, especially Goal 16, which emphasises peaceful, inclusive societies, access to justice, and accountable institutions (Spremenimo svet: Agenda za trajnostni razvoj do leta 2030, 2015). Findings underscore the significance of police-public collaboration in enhancing trust, safety, and participatory justice systems. The preference for community policing embodies a progression towards more democratic, transparent, and community-focused policing methods. This approach is in harmony with the Sustainable Development Goals objective of fortifying institutions and promoting peace and justice (Zvekič et al., 2019).

The study results show that residents highlight the importance of community engagement and collaboration between police and the public, as this supports the SDGs target by building trust in the police, improving public safety, and ensuring that justice systems are responsive, inclusive, and participatory. The preference for community-oriented policing over more traditional, authoritative models suggests a shift towards more democratic, transparent, and community-focused police practices in rural areas. This chapter also acknowledges the pivotal role of public opinion in influencing the relationship between the SDGs, policing models, and security strategies, especially within the rural areas of transitional countries like Croatia. Public opinion is a crucial indicator of the legitimacy and trust in policing practices and institutions (Lobnikar et al., 2015a).

Police models, developed over the last several decades, aim to adapt the police to current societal needs, ensuring that the strategic decisions, structure, and tactics of police organisations align as closely as possible with the specifics of the local communities they serve (van der Vivjer & Moor, 2012). The policing models developed in the contemporary democratic world over recent decades have focused on replacing relatively rigid bureaucratic and authoritative models with new ones that ensure greater police openness to the public (Pino & Wiatrowski, 2006). Development trends common to all modern democratic police systems include professionalisation, technological modernisation, democratisation, internationalisation, and pluralisation (Newburn, 2008), overlapping with the United

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Nations SDGs in providing peace and security (Zvekič et al., 2019). For the Croatian police and the police in other post-socialist European countries, these processes have occurred much faster than in stable democracies, only beginning with the democratic changes and transitions at the start of the 1990s. Europeanisation, depoliticisation, and internal democratisation have also been integral to these police services (Meško et al., 2014). Transitional states have generally adopted an evidence-based approach[1] to public policies and services alongside these democratic changes. Due to these unique development circumstances, police organisations in this part of Europe are still undergoing intensive reforms and re-examining the most influential work models (Lobnikar & Modic, 2018). Their experiences highlight the importance of professional knowledge, skills, and science in police development (Meško & Lobnikar, 2021). These intensive police reform processes are occurring alongside the growth of scientific knowledge about police work in transitional states, though not uniformly across all regions, often prioritising urban settlements.

This study aims to identify the preferred policing model of residents in Požeško-Slavonska County, a Croatian region dominated by rural and suburban settlements. Twenty years ago, the Croatian police predominantly adopted the community policing model, as outlined in a relevant strategy (Cajner Mraović et al., 2003), which remains in effect. The results of this study indicate that the Croatian police have chosen a model that Croatian citizens prefer. However, choosing an appropriate model is insufficient; its practical implementation is crucial. Evaluation studies of the community policing model in Croatia have shown that police visibility (Borovec et al., 2019) and the consistent application of its key components (Borovec et al., 2014) enhance the sense of security among citizens and reduce the fear of crime. Comparative evaluations of community policing in urban and rural Croatian communities (Butorac & Cajner Mraović, 2016) reveal that residents in both types of communities' experience quality interactions with local police, with implementation being more straightforward in rural communities due to higher social cohesion. However, the authors noted limitations in this research, as it did not include all parts of Croatia and was not representative of the entire country, particularly the rapidly changing rural areas.

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[1] Evidence-based policing is a practice in law enforcement that involves making decisions and forming strategies based on scientific evidence. This approach uses rigorous research to determine what works best in policing, emphasising the implementation of policies and practices that have been empirically proven to be effective through well-designed studies, experiments, and data analysis. The goal is to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of police work, enhancing both officer performance and public safety.

The evaluation of community policing in Croatia has also been carried out at an international comparative level. Given the shared history and current similarities between Croatia and Slovenia, comparative analyses were conducted on the implementation of community policing in the urban communities of both countries' capitals (Lobnikar et al., 2015b) and in their multicultural communities (Lobnikar et al., 2016). Although the Croatian police's development and reform process, transitioning from a socialist to a modern democratic society, was slowed by their active role in the war (1991–1995), the results of these studies indicate that community policing implementation in Croatia is on par with, and in some respects, even ahead of neighbouring Slovenia.

These encouraging empirical data further elucidate the results of this study, wherein residents of a predominantly rural and suburban region in Croatia prefer the community policing model. The Croatian police should continue to be guided by this strategic determination and further develop the community policing model. However, these studies highlight potential weaknesses in implementing the community policing model in Croatia. Experiences from other post-socialist countries in this region show typical oversights and errors in planning and implementing the community policing model (Kešetović, 2013; Meško et al., 2013). In Croatia, there was an imbalance between the dynamics of reform processes within the police organisation and the reform of police-community relations (Cajner Mraović & Faber, 2016). Extensive research on procedural justice has shown that organisational and internal procedural justice significantly predicts external procedural justice (Haas et al., 2015; van Craen, 2016; van Craen & Skogan, 2017). Therefore, to continue meeting citizens' expectations regarding the Croatian police's orientation towards the community policing model, focusing on reforms that improve internal procedural justice and organisational justice within the Croatian police is critical.

Interestingly, study participants chose the public-private policing model as their second preferred police work model. The pluralisation of police work is undoubtedly prevalent in Croatia (Derk et al., 2016) and the modern democratic world (Wakefield & Button, 2014). However, it is surprising that participants recognised the necessity of private sector engagement in maintaining their communities' safety. The research was conducted in a Croatian region dominated by rural and suburban settlements, where the need for pluralisation of police work is significantly less pronounced than

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in highly urbanised settlements. In large urban centres, various events related to fun, culture, sports, politics, or other activities occur almost daily, attracting many people and thus necessitating additional security services. Additionally, places like shopping centres, catering facilities, and public transport in large cities experience regular large gatherings and fluctuating crowds (Rudell et al., 2011).

Consequently, residents of urban settlements frequently encounter private security guards, a less common feature in rural and suburban communities. This raises the question of whether the trend of police pluralisation is so prevalent in the media and public space that even residents of rural and suburban areas can adequately perceive it, or if it reflects a perceived inability of the public police to respond fully to all security challenges and needs in their area. Future research should explore this issue. Furthermore, the fact that the public-private divide model is the only one to occupy all four positions on different criteria (see Table 3) suggests varied perceptions among study participants and that its second place ranking in desirability might be less about a clear preference for the model and more a reflection of perceived shortcomings in the other three models.

Notably, participants did not rank the community policing model as the most desirable on the criterion of accountability, which is unusual given that police accountability to the public and the community is a key and highly recognisable aspect of the community policing model (Kappeler & Gaines, 2011). Participants seem not to recognise civilian oversight of police work, an increasingly important component of the community policing model in the democratic world (McMillan et al., 2023). The study findings have substantial practical implications. There is considerable work ahead in this region of Croatia to educate citizens on the mechanisms of civilian oversight in policing. When citizens are unaware of these democratic tools, they cannot employ them effectively to enhance police practices. Such a knowledge gap can undermine trust in the police, consequently diminishing public willingness to collaborate with law enforcement. Ultimately, this lack of cooperation can adversely affect the efficacy of the police force.

The study's emphasis on a particular region in Croatia highlights the importance of localised research in developing policing strategies that meet the specific needs of communities. Despite facing limitations such as using a convenience sample, a relatively small number of participants, low internal consistency of the community

policing scale, and possible biases stemming from participants' experiences, the insights gained are invaluable for crafting evidence-based public policies and services. These insights are especially pertinent in advancing community policing models that resonate with local expectations and contribute to building trust and ensuring community safety. To mitigate the study's limitations, there is a clear path forward for future research to branch into two key areas. Continuing with this local approach in researching policing model preferences is essential, as it allows police to tailor their work to local communities' specific needs and expectations. Research for evidence-based public policies and services must be localised to provide precise and informative data for policymakers (Oliver et al., 2014).

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