The Theoretical Background of the Relations Between Police Presence and Public Safety

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Based on the lessons of the Kansas City experiment in the early 1970s and the Minneapolis experiment in 1998, it can be said that organising public presence on the basis of professional skills and local characteristics significantly reduces crime and improves public safety.

The aim of the study is to examine and present the theoretical background of the research topic by integrating and systematising the theories and conceptual definitions related to the two major areas. Understanding the theoretical foundations and previous scientific findings is essential for measuring the relationships, changes, and correlations between the factors.

The descriptive work is based on the method of document analysis. In presenting the theoretical framework and the results of certain previous, significant empirical researches, it is important to clarify the concepts, functions and individual characteristics of the various factors and phenomena, followed by an examination of their interrelations.

As a result of the study, it can be concluded that public safety is an extremely complex phenomenon influenced by numerous factors beyond police activities. Furthermore, due to the availability of the necessary data, it is worth examining the relationship and potential co-variation between police presence and public safety, through empirical research. The previous empirical research findings, theoretical foundations on this topic can undoubtedly contribute to advancing the effectiveness and efficiency of practical service planning, organisation, and delivery.

The most important conclusion can be drawn based on the results is that the improving public safety is not only the result of the police presence. The current trends in crime and the impression of people are also determined by other factors. In connection with future research, it may be interesting to examine the issue at the local (police station) level, as well as the changes of number of specific police measures and certain crimes in public areas.

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Public safety

Before reflecting on public safety, it is useful to start from the concept and phenomenon of security. The term reflects a fundamental human need, which evolves and changes depending on the social structure of different historical periods. "From the perspective of my topic, it is important to emphasise that public safety is one segment of security. The demand for security emerges as a reaction to some form of threat. There is no doubt about the importance of security, as it is one of the most basic human needs."[2] According to Szabolcs Mátyás and János Sallai, security is a complex concept. Its main components being political security, economic security, environmental security, public safety, defence security, and sustainable development.[3] The law enforcement perspective on security is notably found in the *Rendészettudományi szaklexikon* [Lexicon of Law Enforcement]. According to this, "security is a multi-faceted, complex concept that expresses the state of being free from external and internal dangers and threats to the interests, values, territory, and population of the state and society".[4]

According to the Fundamental Law,[5] one of the primary tasks of the police is to protect public safety and public order. So far, neither phenomenon has a widely accepted definition based on scientific consensus, but when it comes to public safety, in practical life, both explicitly and implicitly, the objective-subjective distinction is applied. Therefore, I will refrain from further discussing the other concepts of public safety.

Among the definitions of public order, we find a purely moral standpoint, according to which it is composed of unwritten rules of coexistence and ethical norms outside the law (German Federal Constitutional Court[6]). The maintenance of these by the police is highly questionable, and according to Géza Finszter, it is even untenable but in any case, it creates uncertainty.[7] In addition to the purely moral approach to public order, there are also mixed (natural/moral and legal) approaches (Győző Concha), as well as purely legal perspectives. Public order is a more abstract and less tangible concept than public safety, not to mention that it is harder, or even impossible, to measure; it is more of a perceptible phenomenon. For this reason, it is a subjective category that encompasses the rules of coexistence within a given community. This is why I focus on public safety rather than public order when dealing with these two concepts.

László Salgó distinguishes two dimensions of public safety: objective and subjective public safety. According to Salgó, "From an objective perspective, public safety represents a state free from dangers and harm, a condition of uninterrupted peace. From a subjective perspective, it is the conscious feeling that our biological existence, physical integrity, property, and freedom are respected by others (by everyone) and are neither harmed, infringed upon, nor endangered." In his view, safety is a societal product, primarily created by state bodies, institutions, and occasionally by individuals and organisations. Its

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2   Remek 2015.
3   Mátyás–Sallai 2015.
4   Boda 2019.
5   Magyarország Alaptörvénye (2011. április 25.).
6   Quoted by Irk 2007.
7   Finszter 2014.

highest level is public safety, which essentially means a state of existence free from disturbances with natural persons being its beneficiaries (or consumers). From a subjective perspective, public safety is the conscious feeling that an individual's physical existence, bodily integrity, property, and freedom are respected values acknowledged by others.[8]

Objective public safety, therefore, is the state in which individuals, their organisations, and state institutions can exercise their rights and fulfill their obligations undisturbed and free from external interference. Subjective public safety on the other hand is the perception of this state.[9]

It is important to note that according to some views, subjective perceptions of public safety do not exist. We can speak of individuals' subjective sense of security, which collectively expresses subjective public safety. In my view, this is the reason why "in law enforcement literature, the subjective sense of public safety is often simplified and presented merely as subjective sense of security".[10] According to Miklós Tihanyi, "These two concepts are worth distinguishing from each other, as security is the broader category, one area of which is public safety. Nevertheless, the subject of law enforcement research clearly refers to the sense of public safety, and therefore, the results will be used accordingly from this point onward."[11] On the other hand there is complete agreement that subjective security is nothing more than the individual's impression, feeling, image, vision, belief, or conviction about the outside world, its dangers, and their level of comfort. In other words, it is the individual's opinion about their general exposure to crime. The personal experience of security can be influenced by numerous factors, which may vary from person to person. Subjective public safety can be described as the totality of individual feelings and impressions.

Measurement of public safety

Both objective and subjective public safety can be measured, but neither has an exact metric. Objective public safety can be measured using crime statistics, while subjective public safety can be assessed through surveys, public opinion researches and interviews. There isn't detectable correlation between them, therefore we can't say that the better the objective public safety, the better the sense of security. In fact, there is a phenomenon called the paradox of fear. The essence of this is that the better the objective safety of an area, the greater the fear of crime. One of the fundamental paradoxes of security is that the greater the level of security, the greater the demand for it. In fact, "the strongest fear of crime is observed precisely in countries with the lowest victimization rates".[12] The paradox of fear also implies that those who are least likely to be affected by crime (women, the elderly) are the most fearful of it, while those who are most at risk of becoming victims of crime (young adult men) tend to feel more confident. Furthermore, people are inclined

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[8]   Tihanyi 2022.
[9]   Salgó 1994.
[10] Tihanyi 2020: 296.
[11] Tihanyi 2020: 296.
[12] Albrecht 2011: 26.

to perceive their immediate surroundings as safer than they actually are, while judging larger regions and the country as less safe than they are in reality. They also tend to overestimate the prevalence of violent crime, a perception significantly influenced by media reporting.[13] Research conducted in Debrecen also confirms that there isn't direct causal relationship between objective public safety and the development of subjective perceptions of public safety. For the majority, even a significant improvement in objective public safety does not enhance their subjective sense of security.[14] The vast majority of the population doesn't come into direct or indirect contact with crimes, meaning neither they nor members of their immediate environment become victims. Therefore, the changes in objective public safety are not subjectively perceived by the majority of society. The subjective sense of security is thus shaped by other factors, such as the media, built environment, surveillance camera systems, and the visible presence of the police and other public bodies in public spaces.[15]

There isn't exact methodology or metric for measuring objective public safety. However, there is a consensus – at least among those who accept that the state of public safety can be measured and expressed – that objective public safety is related to the number of committed offenses. There isn't agreement, however, on which level of offenses or which legally protected interests should serve as the basis for measurement. Similarly, there isn't consensus on what should be the foundation for comparing different statistical indicators. During scientific and professional investigations, it is advisable to consider the results of at least five consecutive years.[16] János Sallai expresses his views on measuring objective security as follows: "Objective security can be expressed using various metrics (e.g. police statistical data) and indicators, which makes it possible to compare the public safety of two or more cities or to measure it."[17] This perspective is reinforced by the definition provided by the *Lexicon of Law Enforcement*, which states succinctly that objective security can only be discussed when data collected on crimes, misdemeanours, etc., are classified and analysed using statistical methods.[18]

There was a time when the general perception regarding public safety held the belief that objective public safety was measurable and quantifiable, while the subjective aspect was not. Today, we know that the subjective dimension of public safety is also measurable. However, the challenge – just as with the objective dimension – lies in comparing the various measurements and their results.

Subjective public safety is measured by the Central Statistical Office in Hungary with only one question in a public opinion poll. The question sounds like this: "How safe do you feel when walking alone in your neighborhood after dark?". It has been in operation since 2013. It is broken down by age, gender, educational attainment and

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[13]   Korinek 1995.
[14]   Mátyás–Csege 2019.
[15]   Tihanyi 2022.
[16]   Tihanyi 2022.
[17]   Mátyás–Sallai 2015.
[18]   Boda 2019.

type of settlement on a regional basis. Respondents can choose from four categories. These are the following:

1. "I feel very safe."
2. "I feel fairly safe."
3. "I feel a little unsafe."
4. "I feel very unsafe."

In the absence of a better option, we must settle for this single question and its four possible answers. On the one hand, it ensures continuity in measuring subjective public safety, and on the other hand, it makes different years comparable, thus providing a basis for drawing certain conclusions. Taking advantage of the opportunity, the investigation of the relationship between the sense of safety and police presence will be interesting in the future.

Police presence in public areas

Visible police presence in public places – one of the most commonly (though by no means the most effective) used tools for maintaining both objective and subjective public safety – has historically formed the backbone of the proper functioning of armed law enforcement agencies responsible for maintaining internal order in states, including Hungary. Public service duty has not lost its crucial role in the operation of modern police forces either.[19]

In the context of public space service, it primarily refers to the time spent visibly by the police in public areas in a manner clearly associated with police activity. This understanding is logical and would likely be the first thought of most laypersons. However, the situation is somewhat more complex. Firstly, this complexity arises from the definition of "public space" within the context of police service. Public space includes not only state or municipal properties intended for public use, like roads, but also private areas designated by their owners for public access. It also includes parts of private property opened and designated by the owner (or user) for public access, as well as private areas that can be used by anyone under the same conditions (open places). Secondly, the time spent in public spaces is calculated based on the unified statistical system (HIIKK) for general police duties, including border policing, administrative policing, immigration policing, public order policing, and traffic policing. As such, time spent in public spaces encompasses activities such as the neighbourhood police officer's school crime prevention lectures or the time spent by a security guard at a guard post. This is logical because in these cases visible police presence undeniably impacts subjective public safety and, in some cases, may even influence objective public safety through its crime prevention effects.

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[19] Papp 2022a.

At this point, it is essential to address the purpose of public space service delivery. Within professional circles patrolling public areas has two or – according to some views (I also share those views) – three main functions:
1. Crime prevention with police presence (guarding function)
2. Reaction to occured infringing acts (intervening function)
3. Crime detection function

Guarding can be understood as an element of law enforcement functions, but it can also be identified as an independent authority service aligned with the work of public safety services. The guarding presence presupposes a state before danger. Its main mission is to prevent abstract threats from turning into harm. Guarding is not a monopoly of law enforcement; in fact, the private sector sets limits on official actions. However, official guarding assumes true professional knowledge, which is based on the forecasting of dangers and the efficient allocation of available forces.[20] In my opinion the keyword is danger prediction. As a responding police, we focus on past actions, instead of the forecast of the future trends of crime. The so called "hot spot method" works, but with the help of the risk analysis maybe we could be more efficient. But this requires a change in strategy.

Based on the strategic direction of law enforcement operations, we can distinguish between reactive and proactive police forces. This classification is quite uncertain, as it is more evident in operations than in organisational structure. However, it is a fact that centralised state police models are more suited for implementing a reactive strategy, while decentralised, municipal-type law enforcement can achieve greater success in prevention.[21]

The first step in hazard prevention is police presence (guarding), which is essential for timely recognition of the threat and the prevention of harm resulting from the threat. If this does not yield results, the second step follows: the suppression of unfolding unlawful acts with legitimate force. It is the intervening function.[22]

An interesting question is the significance of the guarding function on its own, without intervention. It has a deterrent function against unlawful acts because the presence carries the possibility of sanctions, the prospect of enforcement. If the police officer, upon noticing an offense, were not to intervene, the deterrent effect of the presence in this regard would likely diminish or disappear, as people would realise that although the officers notice the offense, they do not intervene. The same applies to the intervening function, which would be less effective and efficient if the officers were not present in public areas, but instead waited for an alert at their service location. This would exclude the possibility of the officer's own observations, and on the other hand, in many cases, it could delay their arrival. Therefore, these two functions of public service provision should not always be treated separately. Thats why the first two functions are undoubtedly closely interconnected, as adequate presence can make responses more effective and faster, while intervention (actions or sanctions) reinforces the deterrent effect of presence.

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[20]   Finszter 2018.
[21]   Finszter 2018.
[22]   Finszter 2018.

The third function (crime detection) follows from the intervening function. If there is an infringing act where the police have to take action, the activities on the field (searching for witnesses and cameras, location protection, etc) can advance or hinder the detection.

My focus is on the guarding function. To understand the essence of the function, we need to consider the findings of two experiments. These are the Kansas City and the Minneapolis experiments.

In the year-long Kansas City experiment (1972–1973) the city was divided into two, or more precisely, three equal parts. "Police patrol strategies have always been based on two unproven but widely accepted hypotheses: first, that visible police presence prevents crime by deterring potential offenders; second, that the public's fear of crime is diminished by such police presence. Thus, routine preventive police patrol was thought both to prevent crime and reassure the public." The first (reactive) area received no preventive patrol. "Officers entered the area only in response to citizen calls for assistance. This in effect substantially reduced police visibility in that area. In the second area, called 'proactive', police visibility was increased two to three times its usual level. In the third area, termed 'control', the normal level of patrol was maintained." The development of public safety was monitored for a year. "Analysis of the data gathered revealed that the three areas experienced no significant differences in the level of crime, citizens' attitudes toward police services, citizens' fear of crime, police response time, or citizens' satisfaction with police response time."[23]

As for the impact of police presence on public safety, this result was widely accepted for a long time and served as the basis for planning and organising police services overseas. Especially since several smaller subsequent studies reinforced these findings.[24] In the Eastern Bloc, including Hungary – if the research findings even reached them – every capitalist achievement was questioned.

In Minneapolis, the Kansas City experiment was repeated in 1998, but with a completely different preparation. Law enforcement professionals identified the city's hot spots. In these areas, the police presence was doubled, while it was halved elsewhere. In the hot spots, the number of offenses significantly decreased over the course of a year, while in other places, it didn't increase.[25]

As the results of the Kansas City and the Minneapolis experiments show, the expertly planned and organised police presence has a positive effect on the objective dimension of public safety.

As I have already mentioned, it is important to note that police presence in public areas refers to all time spent in visible spaces doing police-related duties. Moreover, when considering neighbourhood policing, it should be noted that the time spent in public spaces includes, for example:

– the time calculated by the unified police statistical system for border policing, divison of administration, immigration policing, public order protection, and traffic policing that is actually served in public areas

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[23]   Kelling et al. 1974.
[24]   Ericson 1982.
[25]   Finszter 2018.

- time spent in public areas that does't fall under the concept of actual public service (especially for site security, team service activities, event, accommodation, route, or program site security, and escorting)
- the time spent on residence investigations and determinations, open police information, environmental studies related to the fulfillment of law enforcement duties, as well as on-site inspections and measures related to investigations and criminal inquiries
- the time spent monitoring enforced individuals under residential criminal supervision
- the time used for on-site community engagement
- the time spent on crime and accident prevention presentations[26]

Crimes in public spaces

One possible measure of the effectiveness of the duty in public spaces is the efficiency of crime prevention function, which, as mentioned earlier, can be achieved solely through police presence. In this context, it is advisable to consider the number of crimes committed in public spaces, as police presence on public streets offers little benefit in relation to crimes committed on private property (such as domestic violence within a private home). The number of police officers on public streets and the time they spend in public areas are measurable and, in fact, measured, just like public crime rates. Changes can thus be tracked, and different periods can be compared. Moreover, the two factors can be compared to each other.

At the same time, it is important to note that when examining the objective side of public safety, we must necessarily rely on reported incidents. In cases of typically high-latency crimes (e.g., those related to prostitution), which are concentrated in public spaces, police presence plays a small but significant role in reducing their latency.[27] This also means that in some cases, objective indicators may worsen as a direct result of increased police presence.

Summary

The study specifically focuses on public safety, its objective and subjective aspects, and the crime-prevention function of the visible police service in public spaces provided through only physical presence. To this end, it is essential to place the issue in a certain context. Given that local characteristics significantly influence both objective and subjective public safety, it is advisable to examine the phenomenon at the local (police station) or, at most,

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[26]   Papp 2022b.
[27]   Papp–Kovács 2023.

county level. It is not worthwhile to speak in general terms about the country's public safety, as it is built from the smaller circles of local public safety.[28]

Undoubtedly, the system of factors influencing public safety is extremely complex, and alongside public service provision, it is determined by numerous other factors (population size, composition, urban structure, architectural solutions, surveillance camera systems, media, etc.).

According to our current knowledge regarding police presence, it only has a positive impact on objective public safety if its planning and organisation is based on professional expertise, built upon analytical and evaluative work and risk analysis results. However, this requires the application of tools from other policing models (focal point, community, problem-oriented), in addition to those from the traditional policing model, in a way that aligns with the specific public safety deficit, challenge, and the related goals set for it. There have been quite a few attempts in this regard. It is important to note, however, that

"in general, patrol duty most fully fulfills the police's role in danger prevention and maintaining order. The expectation of maintaining contact with the public is less prominent in the definitions. Their tasks mostly consist of repressing measures in response to offenses. The general belief is that through their visible police presence, they can generate a crime-preventive effect of considerable value. However, it is worth exercising sufficient criticism of this assumption, as we often overestimate the crime-preventive role of patrol duty."[29]

On the other hand, according to the current state of science, police presence generally has a positive impact on people's sense of security. However, excessive police presence concentrated in a specific place and time without justification can have the opposite effect and induce fear. In this regard, police presence is a double-edged sword. We suspect that excessive police presence is harmful to subjective public safety, but we do not know where the line is drawn. The development of subjective public safety is undoubtedly significantly influenced by the level of trust in the police. Many excellent foreign and domestic writings deal with the police's ability to meet public expectations. In connection with this issue, I will also address this aspect in the future.

All in all, we can see how many assumptions and contradictions are present in this complex issue. For this reason, it is important to address it.

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28   Finszter 2018.
29   Tihanyi 2014.

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