THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLICE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND THE MODALITIES OF COPING WITH THE CRISIS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Police organizations worldwide have introduced various organizational and operational changes to cope with the demands placed on them by the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic as effectively as possible. The intensification in the use of digital communication channels is one of those adaptations that enabled the functioning of the police at the organizational level, but simultaneously were a source of stress for police officers. In addition, this adaptation of police communication channels could be complex in rural and suburban parts of Croatia due to relatively high proportions of the elderly population and unequal availability of internet connections.

This article aims to determine how the use of digital communication channels and in-person police communication during the COVID-19 pandemic affected how the police coped with this crisis on an organizational and personal level in suburban and rural communities. Quantitative research using a voluntary and anonymous survey method was conducted on a convenient sample of 367 police officers from two police administrations in Croatia covering predominantly suburban and rural areas.

The results of the Jonckheere-Terpstra trend test and the non-parametric (Spearman) correlation test showed that police officers who estimated that they worked more on community policing activities and problem-solving in direct contact with citizens estimated that they better coped with the COVID-19 pandemic on a personal level, while police officers who estimated that they used digital communication channels more perceived that they better coped with the COVID-19 pandemic on an organizational level.

KEY WORDS

police communication channels, COVID-19 pandemic, digital police communication, coping with stress

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the daily life and habits of the entire population of Croatia. As was the case in the majority of European countries, Croatia also underwent a reorganization of state administration and adaptation of legislation to the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the trend of centralization dominated in terms of information dissemination and decision-making. Although the COVID-19 pandemic is primarily a health problem, the burden of coping with the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic both in Croatia and in many other countries was taken not only by healthcare institutions but also by the police [1]. Such a solution was quite logical under the aforementioned circumstances for several reasons. On the one hand, it was necessary to promptly organize possible activities in a highly hierarchical structure that operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week, such as the police. On the other hand, the measures to contain the spread of the pandemic included new behavioural norms and some important restrictions on the basic human rights of citizens, so the police were in charge of implementing these measures. For example, it was necessary to monitor the population's adherence to decisions regarding the duration of isolation for infected persons and persons who had contact with infected persons. At the time of the first peak of the pandemic during the spring of 2020, Croatia, like many other European countries, opted for introducing lockdown, so the movement of the population, which at that time was quite limited, had to be controlled. During a part of that period in Croatia, it was even forbidden to leave the territory of the domicile county, so the police took over the supervision of the implementation of these measures as well [2]. Such restrictions on human rights caused a revolt among a part of the population, which over time manifested in the form of public protests, so the Croatian police had to face this challenge [3], and such circumstances were not specific to Croatia, rather something many European police forces had to face [2]. What made the police in Croatia even more adequate to become, together with healthcare institutions, a key stakeholder within the state administration in terms of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic was the fact that the Civil Protection Directorate is organizationally positioned within the Ministry of the Interior, which also includes the Police Directorate. Accordingly, in February 2020, the Government of the Republic of Croatia appointed the National Headquarters as the body responsible for adopting anti-pandemic measures at the national level, and appointed the Minister of the Interior to head that body [2].

The key role of the police in containing the COVID-19 pandemic is not specific for Europe only, but is actually a typical modality of states when coping with the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, regardless of geographical area, region, country or continent [4]. It should be emphasized that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the police faced major challenges because they had to perform somewhat contradictory tasks. On the one hand, the police was supposed to protect themselves and citizens from the spread of infection, and therefore limit its own contacts with citizens and contacts between citizens as well. On the other hand, the police were expected to increase communication with citizens in order to timely and sufficiently inform the citizens about all anti-pandemic measures the citizens had to strictly adhere to. While the healthcare system faced both the challenge of the infected and their treatment, the police also partly dealt with infected people to monitor their adherence to self-isolation measures, but mostly dealt with the overall population to prevent the spread of the infection [2].

In response to the threat to the health and lives of police officers during the COVID-19 pandemic, certain police organizations have significantly limited in-person police activities, and have found alternatives for certain activities in the form of simpler technologies such as social media or more complex ones such as drones [5]. The question arises as to how the police organizations operating in suburban and rural communities, where in-person communication is particularly important, coped with this, especially given the fact that such organizations in

Croatia are often additionally burdened by objectively poor internet coverage and the tendency of an aging population that is not even on a subjective level ready to move their communications into cyberspace. Therefore, the goal of this article is to determine how the communication channels of the police reflected on how the police coped with the COVID-19 pandemic on an organizational and personal level in suburban and rural communities.

ROLE OF THE POLICE IN CONTAINING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Although in many countries it is quite common for police organizations to engage in crises such as earthquakes, fires, floods etc., the role of the police in the crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic was something completely different and actually completely novel [4]. The difference is in the fact that in normal crises, no matter how challenging they are, defined protocols of action exist, and within that, a clear role for the police. The COVID-19 pandemic was a completely new and global crisis and national governments around the world tried to determine what their police organizations should do in order to contribute not only to the overall security situation, but also to the containment of the pandemic [6]. Therefore, what happened in many countries was that in the absence of clear rules, the police made very unpopular decisions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic [7, 8], which necessarily had to be reflected in citizens' trust in the police and the overall police legitimacy in a given community. Stott, West and Harrison [9] thus point out that the police during the COVID-19 pandemic found themselves in a much more sensitive situation than usual when it comes to their relationship with citizens and especially citizens' trust in the police. The question therefore arises as to how police organizations responded to the aforementioned challenges. Although they were specific for different police organizations in different countries, one must also take into account the diversity of social circumstances in which different police organizations operated. The social context is different for different countries in terms of living conditions, and these differences are especially emphasized in extreme circumstances such as the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, as Stott, West, and Harrison [9] concluded, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was equally possible for police legitimacy to increase and decrease.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the police lost some of their usual activities. Thus, for example, a study conducted in Canada reports a drastic reduction in calls from citizens to the police at the height of the pandemic [10], and the results of a study on the ten largest police organizations in the United States of America were similar [11]. In some research, the complete lack of communication with the community was observed, which pointed to the necessity of reorganizing such police institutions [12].

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis introduced significant changes in the state, movement and structure of criminality in different areas [4]. Thus, for example, different authors from different countries warn of an increase in cases of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic [13, 14]. However, it should be emphasized that the situation is not so simple or universal, given the fact that some authors [11, 15] claim that no changes were observed in the scope of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the results of his research, Ashby [11] notes a drastic drop in the number of traffic accidents during the COVID-19 pandemic by between 20 and 70 %, depending on the observed area. Some authors [16] warn that at that time there was a sudden and obvious increase in the number of calls to the police that actually involved severe mental health disorders.

Obviously, police tasks and priorities changed significantly during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, there have been organizational changes in the police that had been recorded in different states. Although there are numerous records on this [17], there are only a few relevant scientific studies that have reached the same conclusions using scientific research methods [18]. What should definitely be noted is the fact that despite the organizational

changes recorded by the police around the world in different ways, certain changes are almost universally present during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, changes in police education and professional training. Namely, various authors [10, 19] warn that during the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person police training at police academies was mostly cancelled, which on the one hand is understandable when trying to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus, but irrational on the other hand considering the level of novelty to which the police had to promptly adapt during the given period.

It could even be said that during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the police changed their role in society, i.e. the priorities of their actions, to a certain extent. Research shows that during that period certain police activities recorded a trend of significant reduction, regardless of whether they were reactive [10] or proactive police actions [14]. Some authors for example, Hansen and Lory [13] warn that not all police organizations had the same ability to adapt to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially smaller police organizations that had less resources available, including even elementary personal protective equipment for police officers.

The safety of those who protect the safety of others presented a particular challenge in terms of organizational changes to the police force at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic [10]. In this sense, it is worth highlighting a study [19] that showed that as much as three quarters of police organizations expressed an increased interest in the physical and mental health of their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, while almost all police organizations included in that research at that time said to have adopted new rules and procedures to protect the safety of police officers. A particularly interesting study conducted in Brazil [20] showed that in an effort to ensure maximum safety and the physical and mental health of police officers during the COVID-19 pandemic in that country, there was a conflict between traditional police rules and these new procedures, which made the whole situation even more complex for police officers and police organizations as a whole and citizens as users of services.

A study conducted by Frenkel et al. [21] in five European countries pointed to another important aspect of police organizational changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, namely police managers. Considering the previously highlighted reduction in in-person training during the pandemic and especially the lack of specific education for training police officers on how to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic, the instructions issued by police managers took on great significance because they were practically the only source of guidance for police officers in the complex circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is not surprising to learn from the same research that the lack of communication from managers and the overall lack of support from managers is a far more important stressor during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the period before the pandemic. Papazoglou et al. [22] came to almost identical findings, and even provide recommendations to managers on how to take care of the mental and physical health of their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The complete transformation of social life around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic had an effect on the relations between the police and citizens, i.e. on the trust of citizens in the police, which is closely related to the contacts that citizens have with the police and the consequences of those contacts on police legitimacy [4]. Some studies show that the police reduced community problem-solving activities by as much as 75 % during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic [10, 19]. These are alarming data if one takes into account the fact that citizens' willingness to comply with norms largely depends on the quality of their relationships with those they perceive as competent to control compliance with the said norms, namely the police [23]. If we add one more fact to that, namely the increase in restrictive regulations, i.e. norms that limited basic human rights and freedoms during the COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes clear what kind of potential problem we are addressing here. However, a study conducted in Great Britain by Jackson et al. [24] showed that the burden is not solely on the

police, despite the importance of citizens' trust in the police, rather the willingness of the British population to comply with the measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic was also affected by the sense of community and the need to jointly oppose the pandemic. However, if we take into account the theoretical framework that indicates the importance of police activities in the community for building the community and especially for strengthening social cohesion and collective efficiency of a community [25], we return again to the crucial role of the police, i.e. the essential importance of police legitimacy during COVID-19 pandemic.

This is the reason why some police managers and scientists have been emphasizing the counterproductive aspects of police engagement in ensuring the implementation of anti-pandemic measures since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic [5]. This position is also supported by authors (e.g. Johnson and Wolf, 2020, according to White and Fradella [5]) who claim that the role of the police during the pandemic was created using inertia and based on the path of least resistance, and that the police should deal with crime, while the violation of anti-pandemic measures does not fall under this category and only puts the police in an awkward situation in terms of their relationship with citizens. In explaining these views, White and Fradella [5] refer to the now classic works of literature on police sociology [26-28], which emphasize the phenomenon of calling on the police on the one hand and the objective limitations of the police on the other. So, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, demands were placed on the police that the police could not have fully successfully meet for entirely objective reasons, however, these demands were still set because the police, due to their organization and mission, were most able to at least partially fulfil those demands. The fact is that no other social service is available 24 hours a day for all problems citizens may have and for various crises in the community like the police are. After all, the mission of the police is to protect human lives, and the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a risk in this sense, thus we perceived it as such, it was quite logical that the police should have been the most institution involved in containing the pandemic in addition to healthcare system [5]. Other authors point to similar conclusions, for example, Papazoglou et al. [22] remind that the police are always on the front line of protecting people and property during crises, and that saving lives is actually part of the police's professional routine.

CURRENT STUDY

The aforementioned research objective was operationalized through the following research question:

> *Is there a relationship between the communication channels used by police officers during the COVID-19 pandemic and their perceptions of coping with the crisis on organizational and personal levels in suburban and rural communities?*

In accordance with the aim of the research, and in order to be able to answer this question, the research was conducted in a Croatian region: Slavonia. It is a predominantly rural and suburban area with a single urban centre.

Given the lack of previous research, here we start from the hypothesis that there is no statistically significant relationship between the communication channels used by police officers during the COVID-19 pandemic and their perceptions of coping with the crisis on an organizational and personal level in suburban and rural communities. A combination of two methods was chosen to test this hypothesis. First, Bartlett's and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's test, i.e. factor analysis, was used in order to make sure that the questionnaire actually measures procedural correctness as a resonance of the COVID-19 pandemic on the police and police legitimacy as a resonance of the COVID-19 pandemic on the community. After that, the Jonckheere-Terpstra trend test and the non-parametric (Spearman) correlation test were applied, given that we do not have a sample with a normal distribution.

It should certainly be noted that although not a single police officer refused to participate in the research, some of the research participants did not answer all the questions on sociodemographic characteristics. These questionnaires were not excluded from data processing since they contained answers to all other questions, and it can be assumed that the aim of those research participants was to further safeguard their anonymity in the research, which has its origins in suspicion and cynicism as essential characteristics of professional police culture [29]. However, this should be considered as a study limitation.

METHODS

SAMPLE

The target population in this research consists of 1325 employees of the regular police, criminal police and community policing in Osijek-Baranja County Police Administration and Požega-Slavonia County Police Administration. The research was carried out on a convenient sample of 367 police officers employed in the mentioned branches of the police from both police administrations. Table 1 provides an overview of the main socio-demographic characteristics of the research participants.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the research participants.

Socio-demographic characteristics	*N*	Percentage
Sex		
Male	302	82,3
Female	46	12,5
Professional experience (in years)		
Less than 5	20	5,4
6-10	34	9,3
11-15	85	23,2
16-20	22	6,0
Over 20	184	50,1
Education level		
Secondary school	226	61,6
Higher police education	47	12,8
Other higher education	60	16,3
Postgraduate studies	13	3,5
Manager		
No	264	71,9
Yes	70	19,1
Police branch		
Regular police	164	44,7
Criminal police	64	17,4
Community policing	10	2,7
Residence		
Large city	62	16,9
Small city	166	45,2
Village	119	32,4
Place of work		
Large city	84	22,9
Small city	191	52,0
Village	67	18,3

As can be seen from Table 1, the sample consists mainly of male police officers (82,3 %), with a secondary school diploma (61,6 %) who have over 20 years of professional experience in the police (50,1 %). The sample represents the target population well with regard to the branch of the police and the leadership position of the research participants: close to half (44,7 %) of the research participants serve in regular police, followed by criminal police (17,4 %) and community policing (2,7 %), among whom just a fifth (19,1 %) are police managers. As expected, considering the target population, i.e. the selection of police administrations for the purposes of this article, the sample is dominated by research participants who live (77,6 %) or work (70,3 %) in suburban or rural communities.

INSTRUMENT

This article used an instrument that was created within the framework of the international project 'Changes in Police Organizations during the COVID-19 Pandemic'. The authors of the questionnaire are Maskaly, Kutnjak Ivković and Neyroud [4], and it was adapted for research in the Republic of Croatia by Cajner Mraović and Borovec [30]. The original version of the questionnaire was approved by the Michigan State University Institutional Review Board, and the Croatian version of the questionnaire was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Police College and the Police Directorate.

For the purposes of this article, parts of the questionnaire containing variables that describe police communication channels and modalities of coping with the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on a personal and organizational level.

Police communication channels are described using the following variables:

Q.2.3.7. I have worked on police activities in the community and solving problems in direct contact with citizens.

Q.2.3.8. I have worked on community policing activities and remote/virtual problem solving.

The research participants evaluated the stated claims using the following scale: 1. Considerably less than before; 2. Slightly less than before; 3. No change; 4. Slightly more than before; 5. Considerably more than before. Along with this set of questions, the research participants were instructed to make comparisons of the situation during the month when the pandemic reached its peak compared to the period immediately prior the outbreak of the pandemic.

The perception of coping with the crisis on the organizational level is described using the following variables:

Q.5.1. My police administration is successfully coping with the challenges of the pandemic.

Q.5.2. Police officers in my police administration were well supplied with personal protective equipment during the month when the pandemic was at its peak.

Q.5.3. During the pandemic, most police officers in my police administration/station regularly wore masks/face coverings.

Q.5.4. The organizational changes of my police administration/station were implemented efficiently.

Q.5.5. The changes in policing that were made in my police administration/station during the pandemic improved citizens' trust in the police.

Q.5.6. The majority of people in my community are following the national and local rules and decisions that have been adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Q.5.7. The majority of my friends who are police officers are following the national and local rules and decisions that have been adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Q.5.8. The majority of my non-police officer friends are following the national and local rules and decisions that have been adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Q.5.12. When I was not at work, I regularly wore a face mask in closed public spaces during the month when the pandemic was at its peak.

Q.5.13. Our government is successfully coping with the COVID-19 pandemic

Q.5.14. Our country is better united now than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research participants evaluated the stated claims using the following scale: 1. I completely disagree; 2. I do not agree; 3. I neither agree nor disagree; 4. I agree; 5. I completely agree. Research participants were instructed to compare the situation during the month when the pandemic was at its peak in their country with the situation immediately prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The perception of coping with the crisis on personal level is described using the following variables:

Q.5.9. I spent time with friends or relatives with whom I did not live during the month when the pandemic was at its peak.

Q.5.10. I went for a walk, run or bike ride, or otherwise spent more than a few minutes somewhere for the purposes of relaxation during the month when the pandemic was at its peak.

Q.5.11. I travelled for leisure (for example, I drove somewhere to exercise) during the month when the pandemic was at its peak.

Q.5.15. The coronavirus (COVID-19) is no worse than the flu.

Again, the research participants were asked to rate their agreement with the stated statements based on the same scale: 1. I completely disagree; 2. I do not agree; 3. I neither agree nor disagree; 4. I agree; 5. I completely agree. Research participants were instructed to compare the situation during the month when the pandemic was at its peak in their country with the situation immediately prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

DATA COLLECTION

The data collection in this research was carried out at the end of 2021. during the working hours of the research participants, when they were starting their shift, when all police officers are at the police station. The survey was carried out by police officers who exercise the authority over the research participants, but are not their direct superiors, and who have previously undergone international distance training on the ethics of scientific research conducted on living people.

The interviewers also all received the same specific instructions for conducting this research. Thus, before the distribution of the survey questionnaires, it was explained to the police officers that they were being asked for their help in the research entitled *'Organizational Changes in the Police during the Global COVID-19 Pandemic'.* It was also emphasized that police officers will not have a direct personal benefit from participating in the research, but that they will have an indirect benefit of allowing the police to better cope with similar crises in the future based on the knowledge enabled this research. The interviewers then explained that the participation in the research is completely anonymous, which means that the questionnaires are taken by the research team, without giving insight to police managers, and the collected data will be used in aggregate only. Immediately before distributing the questionnaire, the police officers were told that they could choose not to participate in this research, not to answer certain questions, and that they could withdraw from participation at any time without any negative consequences.

The same information was provided in the letter by the research team that was distributed together with the questionnaire as an informed consent, with the addition of contact information for the competent authority for research ethics (*Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program*) in case research participants have questions or doubts regarding their role and rights as participants in scientific research, or if they want to receive more detailed information in this regard or if they want to file an objection in relation to the research.

RESULTS

Principal components analysis showed the structure of items in two separate components '*Perception of success in coping with the COVID-19 pandemic (organizational level)*' (component 1) and '*Coping of police officers with the crisis situation of the COVID-19 pandemic (personal level)*' (component 2). The results of Bartlett's and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's tests show that the data are suitable for principal component analysis ($\chi^2 = 8\,183$, $p < 0,001$, KMO = 0,906). The principal component analysis used the oblique rotation 'promax', and the correlation between the components is 0,177. Factor loadings on components are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Factor loadings on components of coping on organizational and personal level. 'promax' rotation used.

Variable	Component		Uniformity
	1	2	
Q5.1.	0,790		0,379
Q5.2.	0,748		0,439
Q5.3.	0,772		0,383
Q5.4.	0,812		0,338
Q5.5.	0,771		0,401
Q5.6.	0,827		0,317
Q5.7.	0,813		0,337
Q5.8.	0,803		0,358
Q5.9.		0,805	0,366
Q5.10.		0,541	0,561
Q5.11.		0,772	0,415
Q5.12.	0,643		0,596
Q5.13.	0,727		0,487
Q5.14.	0,589		0,660
Q5.15.		0,569	0,682

The results presented in Table 3 show that the variable 'I have worked on community policing activities and problem solving in direct contact with citizens' is not statistically significantly related with the collective variable 'Perception of success in coping with the COVID-19 pandemic (organizational level)', but variable 'I have worked on community policing activities and remote/virtual problem solving' is, i.e. research participants who estimated that they worked on community policing activities and remote/virtual problem solving more than before the pandemic estimate that the police better coped with the COVID-19 pandemic on organizational level. In contrast, the same variable ('I have worked on community policing activities and remote/virtual problem solving') is not statistically significantly related with the variable 'Coping of police officers with the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (personal level)', but the variable 'I have worked on community policing activities and problem solving in direct contact with citizens' is, i.e. research participants who estimated that they worked on community policing activities in direct and in-person contact with citizens more than before the pandemic estimate that they personally coped better with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3. Results of the Jonckheere-Terpstra test for the analysis of the relationship between in-person and remote police activities and communication on the one hand, and aggregate results of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic on the other hand.

	Jonckheere-Terpstra test	
	Perception of success in coping with the COVID-19 pandemic (organizational level)	
	JT statistics	p-value
I have worked on community policing activities and problem solving in direct contact with citizens	113 500	0,3356
I have worked on community policing activities and remote/virtual problem solving	110 458	**0,00004776**
	Coping of police officers with the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (personal level)	
	JT statistics	p-value
I have worked on community policing activities and problem solving in direct contact with citizens	120 674	**0,006145**
I have worked on community policing activities and remote/virtual problem solving	96 118	0,8167

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Law enforcement is one of the professions that are highly exposed to various risks, and therefore police officers are subject to professional stress, on which there is abundant literature [31-34]. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this became even more pronounced because, apart from the fact that police officers took a leading role in combating the pandemic together with the healthcare system, as was previously pointed out, and apart from the fact that as a result they were given new tasks they had to carry out without much prior preparation, they also had to work overtime due to the spread of the virus among their ranks, which forced them to spend time apart from their families during those difficult times [35]. It is therefore not surprising that the stress experienced by police officers during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the subject of numerous researches in different parts of the world for the past few years [36]. Some of these studies dealt with various factors that influenced the occurrence and stress levels of police officers during the COVID-19 pandemic [37, 38], while some focused on specific aspects of the phenomenon, such as, for example, depression and anxiety [39], general physical [40] and psychological health [41], or even post-traumatic stress disorder [42]. However, none of these studies link communication channels used by police officers with the assessment of the response to the challenges brought by the pandemic on a personal and organizational level. This research tried to answer that question, and the results open up new options for approaches in researching stress experienced by police officers during crises.

The results of this research show a statistically significant connection between communication channels used by police officers during the COVID-19 pandemic and their perceptions of coping with a crisis on an organizational and personal level. More precisely, the intensification

of remote communication by the police during the COVID-19 pandemic is statistically significantly related to the perception of a more efficient police response to the pandemic on the organizational level. In contrast, maintaining in-person police communication during the COVID-19 pandemic is statistically significantly associated with more effective coping of the police with the pandemic on a personal level.

Therefore, we could conclude that this study points to the importance of remote police communication as an important organizational modality for coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have implications for preparing the police for future crises. An important fact is that citizens are often prone to a rather distorted perception of the police as an organization that can promptly solve absolutely any problem without any risks and consequences, which then results in an equally distorted perception of police officers as people who can fulfil any request put before them physically or mentally without it leaving any harmful consequences on them [43]. Such completely unrealistic expectations of the public can especially be expressed in emergency and crises when people feel threatened and need support and help in this regard. This is exactly what probably happened during the COVID-19 pandemic when citizens had increased expectations of the police, which should protect them from everything, including disease. The fact that the minister responsible for the police managed the National Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia to prevent the spread of the coronavirus infection, as well as the fact that the police supervised the implementation of a large part of the measures adopted by the Headquarters [2], contributed to such a notion. Communication through digital channels in the complex circumstances of the lockdown certainly significantly strengthened the capacities of the police as an organization to correspond to the stated needs of citizens, i.e. to contribute to reducing their feelings of fear and insecurity by providing prompt and precise information regarding the implementation of measures against the spread of the virus. This advantage on the organizational level was clearly recognized by the police officers, who are aware that without digital communication channels they would not be able to send all the necessary messages to the public, nor respond to all citizens' inquiries, which would have a negative impact on how the public perceives the effectiveness of the police organization in the crisis linked to the pandemic.

Intensification of the use of digital communication channels is only one of the modalities of adapting police work to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Research conducted in 27 countries on several continents [4] showed that police organizations around the world introduced various organizational and operational changes in order to be able to face the demands placed on them by the COVID-19 pandemic as effectively as possible. However, although these changes enabled the functioning of the police on organizational level, they were simultaneously a source of stress for police officers who had to promptly adapt to these changes despite the fact that they themselves were exposed to the infection as well as their family members [44]. Numerous studies have shown that the amount of novelties introduced in police work during the COVID-19 pandemic represented a significant source of stress for police officers [18], especially if these changes resulted from rules that were mutually contradictory [4], unpopular [44], insufficiently explained [45], or placed a significant additional amount of responsibility on police officers [4]. Some studies [46, 47] have shown that the existing frequent changes to working hours, including overtime, during the COVID-19 pandemic had a very significant impact on increased stress levels among police officers.

Balancing between professional and personal life for police officers is also problematic considering that they are police officers 24 hours a day, and it is obvious that this balancing was difficult for them during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which could have represented an additional source of stress for them at that time [45]. Some studies have shown that during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, police officers were in a situation of

extremely pronounced conflict between their family and professional lives (e.g. Duxbury and Campeau [48]). One of the reasons for this was certainly fear or at least concern regarding the possibility of contracting the COVID-19 virus, which was a regular occurrence among the population of every country during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the nature of their work, police officers had far more objective reasons for such concern, which according to the results of some research [41] was a significant source of stress for them during the COVID-19 pandemic. The possibility of transmitting the COVID-19 virus to their family members was especially a subject of concern and fear for police officers [21].

Considering that during the COVID-19 pandemic police officers were additionally exposed to usual professional stressors, but also to some completely new sources of stress, and they were expected to be maximally engaged in their regular and additional professional tasks, the question arises how they coped these demands. The results of this research showed that the mental health of police officers during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis is significantly related to their in-person communication. As much as it undoubtedly contributes to functioning on organizational level, technology can hardly replace the direct contacts between people in a community. The 2022 survey confirms that Croatian citizens expect direct contact from the police, because community-oriented policing is the most preferred model of police work among residents of Požega-Slavonia County, regardless of age, gender, education, employment or economic status [49].

Although this research is limited to rural and suburban areas, two important implications for the functioning of the police in future crises emerge from it. Firstly, this research certainly represents an important incentive for the development of digital police communication channels, but we should never lose sight of the fact that in-person contacts are irreplaceable when it comes to the mental health of police officers. Secondly, digital communication channels certainly have their advantages, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the key resource of any system, including the police system, are people, and in the future, we need to carefully consider how to make digital communication channels a quality tool for police officers, and not a source of additional professional stress. The potential for this certainly exists since the results of this research show that the use of digital communication channels in the performance of police work can further strengthen the perception of the professionalism of one's own police organization and this certainly should be taken into account when further planning the implementation of digital communication channels in the performance of police work. But, above all, it is crucial to achieve an adequate balance between in-person communication and communication in cyberspace, which should also be the subject of future research as well as the applicability of experiences and knowledge gained during the crisis caused by COVID-19 to other crises that the police encountered.

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