Monographic: Attitudes of children and youth towards the police

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How people perceive and evaluate police authority has been the subject of much study and discussion because of the impact police have on social life, as well as the importance of police officers as socializing agents. During childhood we are taught to contact the police when we find ourselves in a difficult situation, so children generally have a positive image of the police and police officers. However, as adolescence progresses, direct and indirect contact with the police becomes more frequent and young people's attitudes toward the police are largely shaped by the quality of these contacts (Tyler et al., 2014). Interestingly, studies have shown that late adolescents have a worse perception of police compared to adults (Brick et al., 2009), signaling that something problematic may be occurring in these interactions. This difference is highlighted across demographic groups differentiated by gender, color, race, ethnicity, and social class (Hurst et al., 2000; Taylor et al., 2001). This is concerning as public trust in police forces is one of the main factors that encourage people to cooperate with the police. Negative perceptions of the police have a negative impact on the effectiveness and ability of police officers to prevent crime and promote safety (Schuck et al., 2008; Tyler & Fagan, 2008). As a result of this situation there is a need to better understand the contexts, forms and frequencies in which contact between police and young people occurs, as well as the specific details of these interactions. This will increase awareness and generate reflection about how police agents act towards this population and how young people's attitudes towards the police are formed.

In democratic societies, the police should carry out their work in accordance with the rule of law and demonstrating respect for human rights. However, these notions are not always respected, as evidenced by frequent cases of police abuse reported in several Latin American countries (Pappier & Muñoz, 2020). Although each police force is structured and consolidated in a unique way to meet the demands for social control that are specific to the context of each society, most Latin American countries are similar due to the long periods of dictatorship and authoritarian regimes they experienced in the 20th century. These historical factors still have an effect on police institutions across the continent (Zavaleta, 2016). Sozzo (2016) notes that a constant element in democratic transition processes in Latin America involve the lack of deep reforms to police institutions, taking into account their deficiencies in terms of

crime control and their practices influenced by the authoritarian legacy. A characteristic that can be observed among countries with a recent democratic period is that the activities carried out by the police forces have high levels of discretion. This often leads to over-surveillance and violence directed at specific population, groups, with young people, racial-ethnic minorities and the peripheral population being the main victims of police abuses (Sinhoretto, 2020; Zavaleta et al., 2016).

Added to these issues are populist politics, media propaganda and other discourses that signal young people, especially those from more vulnerable areas, as the main source of the dangers that plague society (Associação Nacional dos Centros de Defesa da Criança e do Adolescente, 2007). This situation results in increased surveillance of the youth population, illegal actions committed by police officers against young people and tense encounters with the police (Adorno et al., 1999). Many of the interactions between the police and young people occur in a unilateral manner during which police approach adolescents when they suspect that something wrong or negative is happening. These situations lead to both parties adopting a hostile attitude, increasing the possible negative preconceptions that each party has of the other. The hostilities between young people and police generate a vicious circle that hinders civilized actions designed to ensure a peaceful and balanced social coexistence.

It is important to note that these interactions are characterized by a very asymmetrical power relationship. Police officers should be trained to approach the population efficiently and peacefully and there is an expectation that they can resolve conflicts. Despite this assumption, police often engage in violence with young people. The consequences of abuses of power in a democratic regime can be harmful. These include a deterioration in the legitimacy of authorities and laws that can lead to a larger institutional crisis (Zavaleta et al., 2016). As a result, young people see police forces as an institution with an ambiguous character that sometimes protects and sometimes oppresses (Bretas & Rosemberg, 2013; Lopes, 2013). For certain groups in society, the police may represent more of a threat than a form of protection. This promotes generalized mistrust of police that in the long run can hinder police work. Young people's experiences with police officers are generally negative and have a corrosive effect on the image of the police (Tyler et al., 2014).

The recent disruptive outbreaks involving threats to democracy in Latin America have reignited debate about trust in institutions. These events have shown that this issue continues to be extremely relevant for understanding the contemporary world and envisioning possible futures. In this context, police institutions play a central role in the success of modern democracies (Gonzalez, 2020). Without democracy, there are no minimum conditions for the peaceful

resolution of conflicts that permeate and are inherent to human relations. Academic literature has highlighted the importance of mutual trust between citizens and authorities for the maintenance of democratic order and adherence to rule of law values. This is because a positive relationship with the main institution responsible for enforcing the law would help citizens recognize laws and institutions as legitimate conflict resolution mechanisms (Piccirillo et al., 2022; Tyler & Fagan, 2008; Zanetic, 2017). There is also evidence that preadolescents and young people in the first half of adolescence tend to trust police more than adults (Piccirillo et al., 2022). This evidences the existence of processes that deteriorate the image of police during and after the transition between these life stages. Because children and adolescents are both agents of society and also future adults who will influence the attitudes of next generations, it is of great scientific and social relevance to learn about their perceptions, beliefs, values and attitudes towards the police.

This special issue titled *"Children and young people's attitudes to police"* will public original research reports on the following topics:

- Contact experiences between youth and the police.
- Prevalence of different modalities of contact with police and their possible effects
- Differences based on sex, gender, color, race, ethnicity and social class and their influence on contact with the police.
- Positive experiences of police actions with/for young people (e.g. educational practices, models of police approach).
- Young people's perceptions of the police and their specific practices, such as stopping young people and body searches.
- Social representations of the police expressed by young people through artistic works, cultural and sporting events, on social networks and in other media.
- Youth initiatives and movements that address police violence.

For the scope of this present edition, we understand that childhood and youth are the life stages going from birth to the first years of adulthood. While there is no precise and universally accepted demarcation of the aforementioned age groups and life stages, we encourage authors to use the main international treaties and conventions while also making use of specific legal frameworks in areas where the research was conducted.

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