

Framing Belgian police research: An exploration of scoping reviews regarding police decision-making in terms of topics, methodology and literature characteristics – Towards a research agenda

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Abstract

Purpose: This article provides an overview of the latest empirical research regarding police decision-making in Belgium from 2000-2021 in terms of methodology and general findings (e.g. types and year of publication, topics studied). Recommendations are given concerning police research and the development of a research agenda.

Design/methodology/approach: Fourteen separate and limited scoping reviews regarding police decision-making topics were carried out by students in criminology and law. All scoping reviews followed the same procedure.

Findings: Seventy-nine unique publications are included in the analyses. These show that police violence is most frequently studied, whereas violence against the police was only included in one publication. Empirical research on bodycams and (social) media was not found. Most of the studies followed a quantitative research design, mainly by means of secondary data analysis.

Originality: This article combines fourteen different scoping reviews, following the same procedure, on subtopics regarding police decision-making, thus enabling comparison of the literature found in a consistent way.

Research limitations/implications: The scoping reviews are limited in scope and were carried out by different students, potentially leading to variable interpretations and selections. Additionally, the conclusions are partly the result of the developed review protocols (e.g. keywords, databases).

Keywords

Police – Decision-making – Scoping review – Belgium – Empirical – Research agenda

Article classification: Literature review

1. Introduction

The longstanding tradition of police research, nested in the 17th century, but booming in terms of empirical research since the 1970s with the publication of Westleys' (1970) PhD on violence and the

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police, is characterized by a broad scope in terms of topics, methods and the way in which research is carried out (for, by or on the police; van der Vijver, 2010; Verhage, 2020). Since that landmark in empirical police research, there has been an impressive evolution of police studies, focusing on an amalgam of topics that evolve in line with the challenges of and evolutions in police practice. For instance, more recent research has focused on the use and effects of body-worn cameras (McCluskey et al., 2019; St Louis et al., 2019; Taylor & Lee, 2019) and intelligence-led policing in general, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on police work (Farmer & Copenhaver, 2021; Maskály et al., 2021; Papazoglou et al., 2020). Because of this growing amount of scientific literature, it is important to keep an overview of the research that has already been conducted and topics that can be explored further. To this end, several researchers have tried to map the available research (evidence) related to police studies (e.g. Mazeika et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2018). Such efforts are valuable as they give us an idea of the content and focus of police research in a specific timeframe.

We have initiated a number of scoping reviews to get a grip on topics, methods and insights in two domains of police research: police decision-making on the one hand and police careers on the other hand. Concerning the former, which is the focus of this article, fourteen scoping reviews were conducted, focusing on different aspects of police decision-making. Each review followed the same review procedure with a similar yet topic-specific protocol. This systematic approach allows us to compare and reflect on the results as a whole instead of each scoping review individually. The objective of this article is to provide insight into the characteristics of empirical research regarding police decision-making in Belgium. Relatedly, we aim to identify gaps in this research tradition and explore new venues for empirical research. This can support the development of research ideas given the current lack of a Belgian research agenda.

We first define the different topics that have been included in the scoping reviews to map the available research. Subsequently, we briefly discuss the review method. We then present the main characteristics of the publications, for instance in terms of research methods and subtopics identified. Finally, we reflect on possibilities for further research and the development of a research agenda.

2. Police decision-making topics

The fourteen scoping reviews reported in this article are the result of a group assignment carried out in the framework of the optional course 'Public Police Studies' (3rd Bachelor and Master of Criminology) at Ghent University. For the assignment, we have included a variety of aspects that either impact on the decision-making process of police officers, entail a decision-making process or decisions of police officers in itself, or that police decisions impact upon. The topics were selected based on interviews and observations of the first author's PhD project concerning (ethical) decision-making processes of Belgian police officers (see Feys, 2020) and bundled in four overarching topics.

The first topic concerns **decision-making processes** broadly, subdivided into five subtopics. A first subtopic regards *integrity violations* (e.g. Paesen, 2019), which can be seen as a result of decision-making. Second, a scoping review on *discretion* was conducted, defined as "*the room that frontline officers are explicitly given or which they implicitly have and in which they can, within the legal boundaries of their official acts, make choices* (Gilleir, 2013, p.73, own translation). As such, discretion allows for individual and situational decision-making. Third, we included *moral dilemmas* and how these are handled (e.g. Loyens & De Schrijver, 2012) as such dilemmas can challenge police officers' (ethical) decision-making. Fourth, *ethnic profiling* was studied (e.g. Janssens & Forrez, 2015), considered as a decision-making process in itself. A fifth subtopic identified here is *police violence* (e.g. Noppe, 2016b), which can again be seen as a result of decision-making processes.

The second topic relates to **trust and legitimacy** and consists of three subtopics. *Complaints* provide insight into police officers' decisions in practice (e.g. Vast Comité van Toezicht op de Politiediensten, 2005b). *Trust and legitimacy* was included as a scoping review topic to look at the relation between civilians' perceptions of procedurally just behavior, police legitimacy and civilians' trust in the police organization (e.g. Van Damme, 2017b). We believe these aspects will impact civilians' behaviors which will in turn affect police officers' behaviors. *Bodycams* were included as these may also have an impact on police officers' and civilians' behavior (e.g. Verhage & Feys, 2019). Research regarding these effects is, however, still inconclusive. For instance, some studies have pointed out bodycams can have a positive impact on police-citizen relationships because it can increase trust and a sense of safety for citizens in interactions with the police (Ariel et al., 2017; Goetschel & Peha, 2017; Jennings et al., 2017). It can also have a deterrent effect for both citizens and police officers (Henstock & Ariel, 2017). On the other hand, Guzik et al. (2021) found that police officers appear to be reluctant towards mandatory activation protocols, which may cause problems if it leads to selective use of bodycams.

Third, three **policing strategies** were studied. The *community-oriented policing* strategy focusses on the bond between the police and the public and the need for the police to adjust her work to the interests of society (Verwee, 2017). *Hot-spot policing* and *predictive policing* are interrelated strategies used to predict where crimes may take place and disproportionally focus police attention to it. The former strategy focuses on defining hot-spots where criminality may occur more frequently, the latter strategy aims to predict where (certain types of) criminality may take place (e.g. Rummens et al., 2017). We believe that all these strategies impact police decision-making as they define what is expected of police officers.

The fourth topic includes a couple of **threats to police work**. The first subtopic is the influence of (*social*) *media* (e.g. Bullock, 2018) as the police's use of social media may affect their relation with the public and thus affect police-citizen interactions. A second component of this is the use of social media by civilians, for instance after having recorded police officers' activities, which may challenge the interactions between both. A second potential threat to police work is *violence against the police* (e.g. Laureys, 2014), which may affect the police's use of force in return. Finally, we studied the impact of *COVID-19* on police work (e.g. Alcadipani et al., 2020), arguing that the pandemic has challenged police officers' decision-making as a result of new regulations, new expectations and the different context police officers suddenly need to work in (Feys, 2022b).

3. Methodology

A scoping review is a "*preliminary assessment of the potential size and scope of available research literature. It aims to identify the nature and extent of research evidence (usually including ongoing research)*" (Grant & Booth, 2009, p.101). We chose this method because of our intention to explore the extent and nature of police decision-making research, summarize the available literature on the different topics included, and the methodology used in these studies with the overall aim to identify gaps in the literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Munn et al., 2018). All scoping reviews followed the method developed by the first author of this article (Feys, 2022a), which consists of eight steps. We recommend readers to consult the original article for a fuller discussion on the method and its application to the student assignment.

In general, two phases are distinguished. The **preparatory** phase consists of determining the research frame (i.e. the research topic, research questions, timeframe and context), the search strategy (i.e. key

words/search strings, which databases to be included⁴), the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the piloting of this review protocol. Despite some exceptions concerning geography (see part four, second paragraph), these criteria were the same for all the scoping reviews. Five inclusion criteria were defined: 1) geography (Belgium), 2) target population (police), 3) timeframe (2000 – first half of 2021, when the scoping reviews were conducted), 4) empirical research⁵, 5) inclusion criterion regarding content (specific to each topic). Four exclusion criteria were added: 1) other languages than Dutch and English⁶, 2) bachelor and master dissertations, 3) unavailability of the full-text, 4) exclusion criterion regarding content (specific to each topic).

The **execution** phase relates to the searching and assessing of publications (and meticulously registering these steps), a limited critical appraisal, analyses of the publications, and the reporting of the results. In this article, we solely focus on the results concerning police decision-making topics and literature characteristics. We do not go into detail about the results of the individual reviews as the main purpose of this article is to give an overview of the nature of police research itself.

To enhance the consistency of the findings, the supervisor of the scoping review projects (i.e. first author) checked the search process results of all scoping reviews and the characteristics of the literature found (e.g. type of publication, type of research, specific research methods). She also checked the different scoping reviews on duplicates that appeared in multiple reviews.

4. Results

Table I gives an overview of the total number of hits the search processes generated, the number of potentially relevant publications based on title (after deletion of duplicate publications) and the number of publications eventually included in the analyses. There are remarkable differences between the topics. The scoping reviews on complaints, hot-spot policing, moral dilemmas and ethnic profiling generated less than 1,000 hits. The scoping review on trust and legitimacy yielded most results (n=7,907). It is striking how many publications were excluded based on title in each of the scoping reviews.⁷ The highest number of potentially relevant publications concerns 115 for police violence, which is the only topic with more than 100 potentially relevant publications. For most of the topics, less than ten publications ended up on the shortlist. The only two exceptions are police violence (n=52) and trust and legitimacy (n=12).

Some of the scoping reviews did not yield any results when limited to Belgian research.⁸ Therefore, these scoping reviews were broadened in scope to the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (bodycams and (social) media) or Europe (integrity violations and predictive policing). However, whilst broadening the scope, two scoping reviews did generate two Belgian studies (integrity violations and

⁴ All groups searched three databases (Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest), one scientific journal (Police Practice and Research: An International Journal) and two websites (specific to each topic). We chose this journal for a number of reasons: it publishes both theoretical and practice-oriented research, there are no geographical restrictions, and the journal explicitly aims to focus on quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods research. Furthermore, Ghent University (and thus its students) has full access to this journal.

⁵ We consider research as empirical when the researchers have gathered primary or secondary data themselves. This means literature studies were excluded from the scope of the conducted reviews.

⁶ We did not include additional languages as not all students involved in the assignments have sufficient knowledge of other languages.

⁷ This can be the result of choices made in the review protocol (e.g. keywords using * such as 'polic*', that includes 'police' and 'policing' but also 'policy').

⁸ This does not necessarily mean that there is no research whatsoever on these topics. It merely indicates that the scoping review protocols did not yield any relevant publications.

predictive policing). Concerning the topic of COVID-19, which had no geographical limitations because of its recent nature, only one empirical Belgian study was found. For the scoping reviews with a broader scope, we excluded the total numbers of hits and potentially relevant publications from the table as these would give a false idea about the amount of available (Belgian) research on these topics. For example, the scoping review on COVID-19 yielded 18,119 results, which is in great part the result of the worldwide scope of the review. The further analyses in this article are merely based on the Belgian studies. The topics of bodycams and (social) media are thus fully excluded from hereon. Regarding integrity violations, predictive policing and COVID-19, only the Belgian studies are taken into account.

	Total number of hits	Potentially relevant publications	Number of publications for analyses
Integrity violations	--	--	3 Belgian studies
Discretion	3,147	37	3
Moral dilemmas	734	52	3
Ethnic profiling	815	35	2
Police violence	2,011	115	52
Complaints	395	72	9
Trust and legitimacy	7,907	48	12 ⁹
Bodycams	--	--	0 Belgian studies
Community-oriented policing	1,041	35	4
Hot-spot policing	568	28	4
Predictive policing	--	--	2 Belgian studies
(Social) media	--	--	0 Belgian studies
Violence against police	2,860	19	1
COVID-19	--	--	1 Belgian study
Total	19,478	436	96

Table I. Overview of the results of the search processes¹⁰

The publications included in the analyses are presented in Table II. This overview shows the overlap between some of the topics as several studies were identified in multiple scoping reviews. For instance, discretion was exclusively studied in regard to stress and violence: all three studies identified in this scoping review (Noppe, 2016a; Noppe & Verhage, 2017; Verhage et al., 2018) were also identified in the scoping review regarding police violence. A similar remark goes for the scoping review on moral dilemmas, as all studies (De Schrijver & Maesschalck, 2015; Noppe, 2020; Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2019) were also found in other scoping reviews (integrity violations and police violence), and for the reviews on police violence and complaints that yielded several duplicate results. If we remove all duplicate publications, 79 unique publications remain.

If we analyze the subtopics identified in the different scoping reviews we see a diversity of subtopics, for instance regarding integrity violations (e.g. the impact of police recruits' socialization on their knowledge of the code of conduct and their moral reasoning skills, the impact of a training program

⁹ Four of the studies included in this shortlist combined Belgian results from the European Social Survey with results of that same survey from different countries.

¹⁰ Only the Belgian results have been included in this table to provide a correct image of the amount of available literature on the respective topics. For those scoping reviews that had a broader geographical focus, only the number of Belgian publications on the shortlist has therefore been included. The total number of hits and the number of potentially relevant publications also relate to other countries, which would give a distorted image if included in the table.

on police officers' reactions to misconduct), police violence (e.g. a shooting incident, violence training, racism), complaints (e.g. police violence, racism and discrimination), and trust and legitimacy (e.g. testing procedural justice theory, analyzing trust in the police).

	Studies included in the analyses
Integrity violations	De Schrijver & Maesschalck, 2015; Loyens, 2013; Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2019
Discretion	Noppe, 2016a; Noppe & Verhage, 2017; Verhage et al., 2018
Moral dilemmas	De Schrijver & Maesschalck, 2015; Noppe, 2020; Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2019
Ethnic profiling	Amnesty International, 2018; Vanassche & Verhage, 2015
Police violence	Algemene inspectie van de federale politie en van de lokale politie, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011; Noppe, 2016a, 2020; Noppe & Verhage, 2017; Paesen et al., 2019; Van Damme, 2017a; Vast Comité van Toezicht op de politiediensten, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007e, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d; Verhage et al., 2018
Complaints	De Volder & Gillis, 2021; Van den Broeck, 2002; Vast Comité van Toezicht op de politiediensten, 2004a, 2005b, 2005c, 2008b, 2017c, 2019c, 2020b
Trust and legitimacy	Kääriäinen, 2007; Martín et al., 2019; Peacock, 2021; Solakoglu, 2016; Statistiek Vlaanderen, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Van Craen, 2013; Van Craen & Skogan, 2015a, 2015b; Van Damme, 2013, 2017b
Community-oriented policing	Van den Broeck, 2002; Vast Comité van Toezicht op de politiediensten, 2007d, 2016; Verschelde & Rogge, 2012
Hot-spot policing	Evenepoel & Christiaens, 2013; Moons et al., 2008; Rummens & Hardyns, 2020, 2021
Predictive policing	Hardyns & Rummens, 2018; Rummens & Hardyns, 2021
Violence against police	Van Branteghem et al., 2013
COVID-19	Vast Comité van Toezicht op de politiediensten, 2020d

Table II. Overview of the publications per topic

Twenty-three of the unique publications were written in English, 56 were written in Dutch. The high number of Dutch publications is partly the result of the high number of reports of Belgian police oversight bodies in the scoping reviews (n=47 unique publications). These reports were mainly found in the reviews concerning police violence and complaints, where the majority of publications was written in Dutch. The publications concerning ethnic profiling were solely written in Dutch, studies on moral dilemmas, hot-spot policing and predictive policing were only published in English (mainly journal articles). The reviews of the other topics include both Dutch and English publications.

Most (n=50) publications concern a report (e.g. research report or investigative report of a Belgian oversight body) rather than a scientific article (n=24). The other publications are a book chapter, three websites and one conference proceeding. Some topics are exclusively found in scientific publications (integrity violations, discretion, moral dilemmas, predictive policing) whereas other topics are reported both in journal articles and investigative reports (e.g. community-oriented policing, police violence, complaints).

Figure 1 provides an overview of the numbers of unique publications published each year since 2000. For most topics, this ranges over a time span (e.g. police violence from 2001-2020, complaints from 2002-2021, trust from 2007-2021). Some of the topics, albeit being studied over a time span, are only studied every few years (e.g. community-oriented policing in 2002, 2007, 2012, 2016; hot-spot policing in 2008, 2013, 2020, 2021; integrity violations in 2013, 2015 and 2019). Other topics appear to only have been studied more recently (e.g. moral dilemmas and ethnic profiling since 2015, discretion since 2016, predictive policing since 2018).

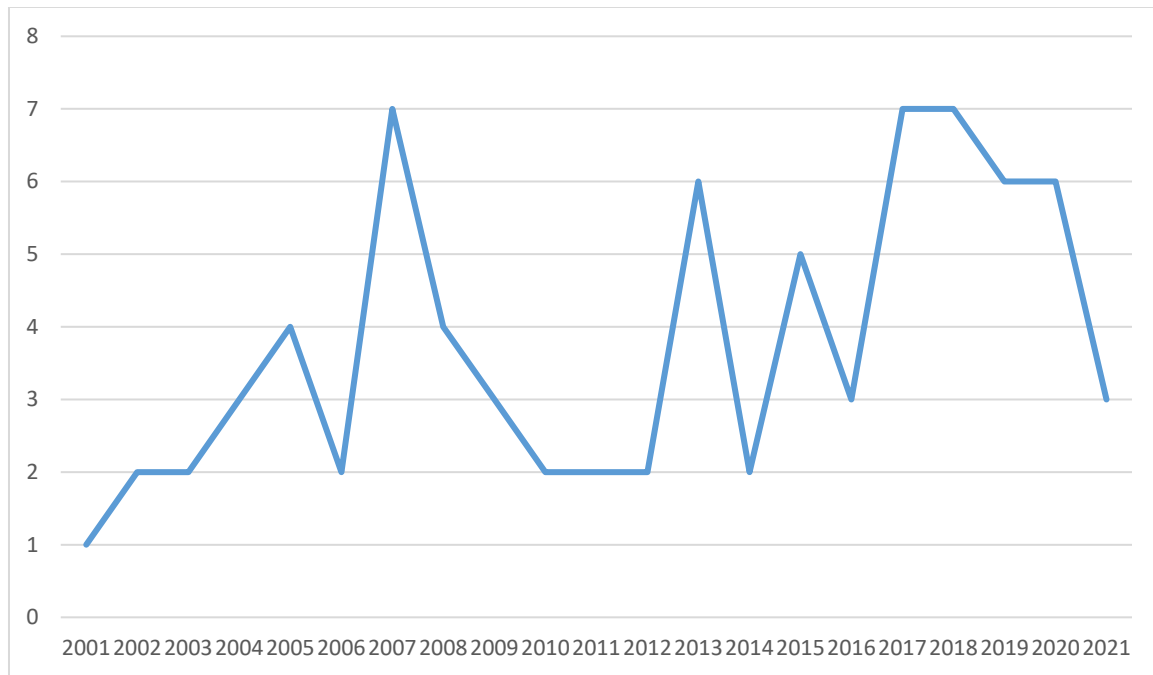


Figure 1. Overview of the division of the publications over time

Taking into account the unique publications only (n=79), we identify 57 quantitative, twelve qualitative and ten mixed-methods studies (operationalized as combining quantitative and qualitative research methods). Table III presents the types of research designs identified in the different scoping reviews, including duplicate publications to give an overview of the nature of the empirical studies per decision-making topic. The highest numbers of quantitative studies are found in the topics of police violence (n=38) and trust and legitimacy (n=12). The latter topic is exclusively studied by means of surveys, the former mainly by analyzing complaints or other secondary data. Police violence is, to a lesser extent, also studied by means of mixed-methods designs (n=7), usually by combining the analysis of complaints (or other secondary data) with primary data collection (e.g. interviews), and by qualitative designs, mainly in the form of interviews.

	Qualitative studies	Quantitative studies	Mixed-methods studies
Integrity violations	1	1	1
Discretion	0	1	2
Moral dilemmas	1	1	1
Ethnic profiling	2	0	0
Police violence	7	38	7
Complaints	2	5	2

Trust and legitimacy	0	12	0
Community-oriented policing	1	2	1
Hot-spot policing	0	3	1
Predictive policing	1	1	0
Violence against police	0	1	0
COVID-19	0	0	1

Table III. Overview of the types of research designs used in the publications

Considering the unique publications (n=79), secondary data analyses are most frequently reported (n=50), followed by surveys (n=25), interviews (n=16), and to a lesser extent observations (n=6) and focus groups (n=3).¹¹ Two topics were studied using all types of research (i.e. secondary data analyses, surveys, interviews, observations, focus groups): complaints and community-oriented policing.

	Secondary data	Surveys	Interviews	Observations	Focus groups
Integrity violations	1	2	1	2	
Discretion		3	2		
Moral dilemmas		2	1	1	
Ethnic profiling			2		1
Police violence	44	7	10	3	
Complaints	7	3	2	3	1
Trust and legitimacy		12			
Community-oriented policing	3	2	1	1	1
Hot-spot policing	3	1	1		1
Predictive policing	1		1		
Violence against police		1			
COVID-19	1		1		

Table IV. Overview of the number of publications in which certain research methods were used

5. Discussion

The scoping reviews reported in this article provide a general overview of the Belgian empirical research on police decision-making topics from 2000-2021. We found a relatively high amount of research on different subtopics – after removal of duplicates, 79 unique publications remain. This number does, however, not give an accurate image of the actual number of studies that are/have been performed in Belgium as multiple of these publications are written on the basis of the same research project (e.g. Noppe, 2016a, 2020; Noppe & Verhage, 2017; Verhage et al., 2018), some publications were found in different scoping reviews, and 47 publications are a (mandatory) yearly or investigative report published by police oversight bodies (*Comité P, Algemene inspectie van de federale politie en van de lokale politie*) frequently including an analysis of complaints submitted to that body. Furthermore, we noticed that some studies including (well-known) Belgian research were not found based on the scoping reviews (e.g. Feys & Verhage, 2019; Gilleir, 2013; Rummens et al., 2017). This is probably the result of some limitations regarding the use of keywords and databases to which the

¹¹ The total number for types of research (n=79) does not correspond to the total number of specific methods (n=100) because several studies use multiple methods.

scoping reviews were subject (see Feys, 2022a). Undeniably, more research would have been found if more police decision-making topics had been included (e.g. integrity policies, the prevention, repression and sanctioning of integrity violations, police oversight, technology-led policing, digitalization). This means that a couple of topics have not been reviewed and lack in the overviews presented in this article. Taken together, the findings in this article need to be read with caution as it does not provide a full image of Belgian police decision-making research.

The scoping reviews resulted in 96 publications – 79 unique publications if we exclude duplicate publications – but the results from the search processes differed greatly: whereas the scoping review on trust and legitimacy yielded 7,907 results, the scoping reviews on complaints, hot-spot policing, moral dilemmas and ethnic profiling generated less than 1,000 hits. No Belgian publications were found concerning bodycams and (social) media. Only a few empirical publications were found on the topics of violence against the police (n=1), COVID-19 (n=1), ethnic profiling (n=2), predictive policing (n=2), integrity violations (n=3), discretion (n=3), moral dilemmas (n=3), community-oriented policing (n=4) and hot-spot policing (n=4). The highest numbers of publications were found for the topics of complaints (n=9), trust and legitimacy (n=12) and police violence (n=52). These high numbers may be partly explained because of the inclusion of police oversight bodies' reports on complaints, usually including complaints concerning police violence. These trends in the results are a first indication of topics that, overall, deserve more attention in the research tradition on police decision-making. Recently, however, multiple new research projects have been initiated, covering exactly some of the topics that were found to be understudied: professional profiling by the police (Stacius & Verstichel, 2021), violence against the police (IRCP, 2022a), the impact of mobile information technology on police work (KU Leuven, 2021), spatiotemporal patterns and efficacy of routine police patrol strategies (IRCP, 2022b), and big data policing (IRCP, 2022c).

Concerning research methods we notice differences between the topics. Ethnic profiling has, for example, only been studied qualitatively, trust and legitimacy is solely studied by means of survey data, and hot-spot policing is not studied in a qualitative manner (potentially because of the quantitative nature of the topic itself). Police violence is reported in 38 quantitative publications and seven mixed-methods publications, but this is in large part because of the many reports of police oversight bodies that included an analysis of complaints. Overall, the majority of the (unique) publications found in the scoping reviews used a quantitative design (n=52), a minority used either a qualitative (n=12) or mixed-methods design (n=10). This analysis shows the unequal divide between the different types of research and the strong position of quantitative methods in the research tradition on police decision-making. It is often believed that quantitative research is more frequently (or easily) published in criminology (Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury et al., 2012). Several authors have found that articles published in criminology related journals are mainly based on quantitative methods (Crow & Smykla, 2013; Kleck et al., 2006; Woodward et al., 2016). Our results partly corroborate this: more than half of the journal articles is published based on a quantitative design (n=15), whereas only five qualitative and four mixed-methods studies were published as a journal article. This is, however, not really surprising considering the majority of the publications included in the analyses is quantitative in nature. This analysis provides another point of departure for new police studies. For instance, it would be useful to analyze the official numbers on the ethnicity of civilians involved in police stops to give a first indication of the potential size of ethnic profiling in Belgium. It would be equally interesting to qualitatively understand how precisely civilians' opinions concerning trust in the police are shaped and how the concepts of procedural justice and police legitimacy are interrelated, why civilians decide to obey the law when they believe the police behave procedurally fair, etc.

Secondary data analyses were most frequently reported (n=50), followed by surveys (n=25) and interviews (n=16). There is only a limited number of observational studies (n=6) and focus group designs (n=3) despite their usefulness for police decision-making research (perhaps because of a lack of access to police organizations?). Observational methods allow researchers to get a grip on actual decision-making instead of police officers' perceived decision-making (e.g. reflected upon by means of interviews). Focus groups, which specifically focus on interaction between participants, may be extremely useful as a form of debriefing, for instance to discuss a police intervention or reflect on the process of decision-making after an observation. Two topics were studied using all types of methods (i.e. secondary data analyses, surveys, interviews, observations, focus groups): complaints and community-oriented policing. Again, this analysis is an exploration of the empirical literature, this time in terms of research designs that are underutilized to study specific topics, and presents some interesting starting points for defining a comprehensive research agenda.

A final interesting point of discussion is the low number of scientific articles compared to research reports. We would highly recommend Belgian researchers to publish their results more in (international) scientific journals as it can help other researchers in finding these studies and defining the scope of their project, identify gaps in the research traditions (rather than gaps in which research is published in scientific journals), build on previous research and add to the existing knowledge on a topic. Additionally, scientific articles are subject to an (international) peer-review, which makes this particular venue stand out from other types of publications.

6. Conclusion

This article combines fourteen scoping reviews on Belgian empirical police decision-making research carried out in the first half of 2021. We aimed to give substantiated reflections on the current empirical research tradition regarding police decision-making in Belgium. We hope these points of discussion and recommendations will help police researchers to identify gaps in the literature concerning their topic of interest and guide future research efforts. We would also like to encourage other researchers to do a similar exercise and map the available research on other topics and in other countries. Such efforts would allow us to get a more comprehensive view on (international) police research of the last decades.

Current police decision-making projects are usually short term and part of a PhD research that is limited in scope, time and resources, and do not fit into a long research plan. In comparison with other countries, Belgium lacks a tradition of research programming that allows for a long-term vision on topics and domains that need to be addressed. This can have as a side-effect that knowledge building is limited (Verhage, 2020). Developing a sound and solid research agenda with an accessible body of knowledge on police research is indispensable when researchers want to build and develop knowledge in the field of police studies. The insights generated with these scoping reviews will allow researchers, practitioners and policy makers to explore an overarching research program¹² with the overall aim to improve police work. This might also allow for the further development of structural cooperation with police forces. Cooperation is now often based on research-steered questions that are sent out to the police by research teams. Although this no doubt results in well-founded partnerships, a structural type of partnership, headed by a research program, would have several advantages. This would not

¹² One of the good examples here is SIPR, the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (2022).

only allow for more mutual input and growth, but also for a joint development of research questions and the collaborative design of police research.

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