Attitudes of Newly Recruited Icelandic Police Students Towards Diversity

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Abstract

Scholars have described prejudice towards various minority groups as one of the negative characteristics of police culture. Visible prejudice within the police has serious consequences for trust and legitimacy, thus reducing the willingness of the public to cooperate with them. However, little is known about the attitudes of police students towards police work in a diverse society in the Nordic context. This paper focuses on newly recruited police students in the Icelandic police university program. Police students' attitudes towards diversity are analyzed in the context of various possible work-related scenarios. The study is based on a survey of all newly recruited police students in Iceland, conducted yearly from 2018 until 2023. The findings indicate that police students are generally positive towards at least certain types of diversity measures in policing, although support for diversity has declined slightly in the most recent year.

Introduction

In late December of 2023, an Icelandic news article reported an arrest on Christmas Eve (Jónsdóttir, 2023). The article was based on a viral Facebook post by an ethnic Icelandic woman, married to a man from Kenya, who claimed her son had been arrested downtown solely due to his dark skin. She stated this happened regularly to her two sons (Jónsdóttir, 2023). The post sparked widespread debate and media coverage. This incident is a part of a broader pattern of alleged discrimination by Icelandic police, based on ethnic or racial identity. In 2022, a 16-year-old boy was arrested by police Special Forces when he was mistaken for an escaped prisoner. The case drew significant attention as both the boy and the escaped prisoner were of mixed race. The boy´s mother, a prominent human rights lawyer, publicly condemned the police's actions, highlighting racism and racial profiling (Ólafsdóttir, 2022), and sparking broader discussions within Icelandic society.

Despite these claims, and others put forward before and after this incident, the police have consistently denied different treatment based on ethnicity, race, or other minority background. For example, the South Peninsula Police commissioner—responding to a news story about the frisk and search of dark-skinned youth in the town of Keflavík—stated in an interview that there was no racial profiling in his police force practices (Markúsdóttir, 2022). The dark-skinned boy was among ethnic Icelandic friends and was the sole individual searched, leaving the impression that the police decision-making was based on his skin color.

In contemporary societies, the relationship between police and minority groups has become an area of scrutiny and concern. Research indicates that these relationships are often strained (e.g., Bowling et al., 2008) and, in some cases, overtly negative

(Chan, 1997; Loftus, 2009; Waddington, 2009). A critical aspect of this dynamic lies in the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions held by police officers towards minorities, particularly non-white citizens, and how these negative attitudes potentially influence police practices. Most of the literature on the relationships between the police and minority groups focuses on the United States (US) (e.g., Gelman et al., 2007; McFarland et al., 2018) and the United Kingdom (e.g., Bowling & Phillips, 2007; Yesufu, 2013), documenting discriminatory practices by the police. This phenomenon has been less studied in the Nordic context and research specifically addressing the Icelandic context has not yet been conducted.

Nordic countries, including Iceland, are known for high levels of public trust in their police forces (Kaariainen, 2007), relatively low crime rates (Institute for Economics & Peace [IEP], 2023), and traditionally homogenous populations (Ugelvik, 2016). Cultural homogeneity is perceived as one of the foundational pillars contributing to the Nordic country's high level of social cohesion and a general sense of societal security (Keskinen et al., 2019). However, the demographic landscape has been shifting over recent decades due to an increased influx of migrants, leading to greater ethnic, cultural, and social diversity and consequent societal transformations. This demographic change has brought to the forefront challenges in the interactions between the police and migrant communities (Solhjell et al., 2019; see also Haller et al., 2020; Saarikkomäki et al., 2021).

Iceland presents a compelling context for studying these attitudes due to its significant demographic shifts within a brief period. In less than 30 years, the proportion of migrants and individuals of migrant descent has surged from less than 2% in 1996 to approximately 20% of the population in 2023 (Statistics Iceland, 2024). In contrast, the composition of the police force does not reflect this diversity, with very few police officers having minority backgrounds (Oddsson et al., 2020). Further, no official initiative has been aimed at diversifying the police force (Bragason et al., 2023).

This paper examines the attitudes of newly recruited police students in Iceland towards diversity in law enforcement by using survey data administered to all incoming students from 2018 to 2023. The study explores explicitly three main areas. First, it assesses students' perceptions of minority representation within the police force and the need for the force to mirror the demographic composition of various minority groups in society. Second, the research focuses on the students' recognition of the importance of diversity-related topics within police education. Last, attitudes toward cultural sensitivity in policing are analyzed. The study evaluates the extent to which prospective police officers perceive cultural sensitivity in policing and using respectful and inclusive language in their interactions with diverse populations as important.

Background Literature — Attitudes of Police to Social and Cultural Diversity

The main point of departure in many scholarly discussions of policing in diverse societies is the unequal treatment of people. This prompts questions about whether an individual´s ethnicity or other minority background factors into police decision-making. Numerous studies conducted within the Anglo-Saxon context have documented instances where police discriminate against people belonging to racial and ethnic minority groups (for a review, see Huiziga et al., 2007; Kochel et al., 2011; Piquero, 2008). Manifestations of discrimination include under-policing (i.e., benign neglect) and over-policing, which usually affect the same groups; racial/ethnic profiling (Liska & Chamlin, 1984; Myer & Chamlin, 2011); disproportionate rates of stop and search (Bowling & Phillips, 2007; Glover et al., 2010); and disproportionate rates of arrests without pressing charges (Holmberg & Kyvsgaard, 2003). Additionally, research has highlighted tensions between police and members of LGBT+ communities (Dwyer et al., 2017; Miles-Johnson & Death, 2020), demonstrating that experiences of unequal treatment on behalf of the police go beyond race and ethnicity.

A further aspect of the research literature on police and diversity concerns the internal dynamics within police organizations. As Irene Zempi (2020) argues, empirical data on the occupational experiences of women, ethnic minorities, and LGB officers within the police force show how they are perceived as the "other" in predominantly white, heterosexual male organizations. The increase in the number of police officers with minority backgrounds has been met with resistance (Wieslander, 2018), sustaining a low level of diversity within the police (Van Ewijk, 2012). Consequently, women and people with minority backgrounds might experience discrimination, prejudice, and bias within the police. If prejudice, bias, and unequal treatment based on gender, ethnicity, race, or other minority backgrounds are prevalent within the police, it is unsurprising that such disparities could also manifest in interactions between the police and members of the public.

Similar patterns have emerged in the Nordic context, where studies have highlighted a problematic relationship between police and various minority groups, particularly those with ethnic backgrounds different from the white majority (Egge, 2008; Holmberg & Kyvsgaard, 2003; see also Keskinen & Himanen, 2024; Keskinen et al., 2019; Mulinari & Keskinen, 2022). Holmberg and Kyvsgaard (2003) claim that, within the Danish Criminal Justice system, persons with foreign backgrounds are more likely to be arrested and more likely to be remanded in custody without being convicted. Furthermore, research from Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark indicates that ethnic minority youth exhibit lower levels of trust in the police compared

to non-minority youth, with trust further diminishing following interactions with the police (Solhjell et al., 2019; see also Haller et al., 2020 and Saarikkomäki et al., 2021).

The stereotype of ethnic and racial minorities as criminals is deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of most Western nations, which extends to attitudes toward immigrants as well (Hellwig & Sinno, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2016; Zick et al., 2008). With increasing diversity within a society, negative attitudes can grow, leading to a backlash (Lentin & Titley, 2011). As members of broader society, police officers hold, at least, similar attitudes towards diversity that can be both overt and covert. They are not excluded from the predominant ideology of their society, nor are they immune to stereotypes, biases, and different types of prejudice. Biases among police officers can be explicit and implicit, manifesting in unfounded judgment about people or groups of people. While explicit bias is mainly expressed in speech and behavior, implicit bias operates subconsciously. Thus, implicit bias can be shaped by stereotypes and personal characteristics, subtly influencing perceptions and contributing to prejudice (Gardner et al., 2024).

Unequal treatment both outside and within the police force has been attributed to police bias and stereotyping (Ben-Porat, 2008; Rowe, 2004). However, Peterson and Åkerstöm (2013) argue that some scenarios described as discrimination may be unavoidable for the police to perform their work effectively. Waddington (1999) reminds us that police culture is shaped by beliefs and values, which include biases and stereotypes. These can, and likely do, influence police officers' behavior during encounters with minority groups—either as suspects or victims of crimes—potentially leading to discriminatory practices. For example, the discretionary nature of police work allows officers to make subjective decisions, which can affect actions such as stop-and-search procedures, case prioritization, and the intensity of their responses (Holmberg & Kyvsgaard, 2003).

Studies indicate a decrease in overt racism within police forces, alongside a reduced tolerance for derogatory and racist expressions among police officers (Loftus, 2009; Souhami, 2014; Wieslander, 2014). Moreover, it is important to recognize that not all discriminatory actions by police are intentional. Smith and Alpert (2007) argue that unequal treatment of individuals from minority groups by police officers is mainly due to the officers' unconscious biases. These biases may be created through direct exposure to groups frequently involved in criminal behavior or an illusory correlation mechanism — incorrectly associating certain groups with criminal behavior.

Research on attitudes within the police has predominantly focused on police officers rather than police students. To better understand the makeup of police students, it is interesting to look at the demographics of those who become police officers. A large majority of police officers around the world are men, and women have struggled to become police officers (Silvestri, 2018). Women, people with minority backgrounds, and LGB police officers have experienced prejudice, disadvantage, and exclusion within the police force as they are perceived as the "others" (Zempi, 2020 see also Silvestri, 2017). Moreover, while diversity is low in the police, the number of higher-ranking police officers with minority backgrounds is even lower (Van Ewijk, 2012).

In Iceland, a 2013 study revealed that many female police officers faced sexual harassment and bullying from their male counterparts, contributing to their reluctance to remain in law enforcement (Steinþórsdóttir, 2013). Norwegian research on police students from minority backgrounds highlights their challenges in becoming integrated into the group. The study found that the predominant police culture during their training failed to recognize or appreciate their distinctive cultural proficiencies, which had initially inspired their enrollment into police studies. This research also illustrates a decreased retention rate among individuals from minority backgrounds within the police force (Bjørkelo et al., 2015). Furthermore, Bjørkelo et al. (2021) argue that recruiting and retaining police officers with minority backgrounds in the Norwegian police has been difficult. The primary reason for the termination among these officers is a pervasive sense of not belonging. This suggests that discrimination within the police force affects not only the public but also officers from minority backgrounds and female officers.

This brings us to the debate on whether individuals with negative attitudes toward minorities and women are more likely to seek careers as police officers, or if they develop such biases when socialized into the police culture. Smith and Alpert (2007) point out that those who withhold overtly racist attitudes are likely filtered out during the recruitment process (see also Holmberg & Kyvsgaard, 2003). However, those who hold subtler, socially driven stereotypes are more difficult to detect and could readily be admitted to police programs. During their training at police academies or police university colleges, students are being monitored for behaviors such as displaying negative attitudes toward minority groups. When they enter the police force, it is more challenging to monitor their actions, and implicit biases can influence police officers' discretion. According to Sato (2003), police students gain insight into police culture through organizational socialization, wherein they absorb organizational attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge during their training at an institutional and individual level (see also Chan, 1997).

In many cases, the socialization of police students into the police force starts when they start studying for the role. Usually, at least some of the teachers are trained police officers and, in many instances, police students take part in their vocational training at police stations. Hence, it is important to continually provide diversity awareness training to police officers throughout their careers, rather than solely at the beginning of their study (Miles-Johnson et al., 2021). This is of particular importance when considering the recent societal changes.

Research indicates that instances of unequal treatment by the police towards individuals from minority backgrounds can put these groups at a disadvantage (Miles-Johnson et al., 2021). Therefore, recognizing how harmful this negative relationship is for both police and the public underscores the importance of trust and legitimacy for the police. Public confidence in the police hinges on perceptions of fairness and justice in policing practices. Perception of police bias reduces the likelihood of good relations between police and communities and may make people feel less safe (Coon, 2016). Moreover, experiences of discrimination can result in ethnic minorities perceiving the police as less legitimate and trustworthy compared to individuals from non-minority backgrounds (Brown & Benedict, 2002; Van Craen, 2012). This can have an impact on the effectiveness of policing.

Context of the Study

Until the 1990s, Iceland had a relatively homogeneous ethnic composition, with migrants comprising less than 2% of the population (Statistics Iceland, 2024). However, after joining the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1994 and experiencing increased labor demand, Iceland saw a significant influx of workers from European Union (EU) countries (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019). By 2023, migrants made up almost 17% of the population, with second-generation migrants (born in Iceland to parents born and raised abroad) adding another 1.8%. Moreover, people with mixed Icelandic and foreign backgrounds constitute 1.4% of the population (Statistics Iceland, 2024). This includes a growing number of youths with mixed ethnicity or race, such as the son of the aforementioned human rights lawyer mistakenly arrested by the police special forces. Hence, nearly one-fifth of the Icelandic population now consists of migrants or those with foreign background, making the country far less homogeneous than before.

Iceland has been celebrated as a haven for LGBTIQA+ rights, achieving progressive full legal equality in 2010. However, some scholars (Ellenberger, 2017) critique this portrayal, arguing that, while Iceland may be a haven for gay individuals, it often overlooks other queer groups. Minority identities based on ethnic origin, skin color, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity are protected from hate speech within the Icelandic penal code, article 233a (Icelandic General Penal Code No. 19/1940). This provision aligns with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) from 1976 and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (Eyþórsdóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019). In 2022, Iceland further strengthened its legal framework by introducing specific legislation against hate crimes (Eyþórsdóttir, 2023). Equal treatment for all persons, irrespective of minority identity, was implemented in Icelandic law in 2018, thus banning discrimination.

Similar to other European police forces, most police officers in Iceland are white men, although the number of women within the police force has increased (Steinþórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2022). Despite the recent demographic changes in Icelandic society, the police force is relatively ethnically homogenous; for example, 94% of newly recruited police students in 2017 had ethnic Icelandic parents (Oddsson et al., 2020).

Except for an online recruitment campaign from the National Commissioner of the Police in 2023, no work has been done to increase the number of police officers with a minority background in the police. Moreover, no official strategy has been implemented to change the demographic of police officers. Formal discussions about diversity in policing in Iceland have mostly focused on urban versus rural policing and gender issues (Bragason et al., 2023). Consequently, there has been no official or political emphasis on ethnic diversity within the police, despite significant societal changes in recent decades. This contrasts with the political priority in many European countries (see Wieslander, 2020). Efforts have, however, been made to increase the number of female police officers.

Research on the attitudes of police officers and police students toward diversity in society in Iceland is almost non-existent, leaving this area relatively unexplored. Yet, there has been research on attitudes towards women in policing. There is some indication that male police officers hold negative attitudes towards the capabilities of their female counterparts. Furthermore, Icelandic police forces have been characterized as perpetuating hegemonic masculinity, prioritizing male privileges and interests (Steinþórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2022).

As noted earlier, there have been instances where the police have displayed resistance when the media has highlighted minority experiences of negative interactions between individuals of minority backgrounds and the police. These narratives consistently

reflect the negative experiences of people from minority backgrounds, which the police have neglected to acknowledge. Both the head of the National Police Association and the head of the Metropolitan Police Association have publicly denied any presence of racism within the police force (Yaghi, 2020). As previously stated, the commissioner of the South Peninsula Police denied any racial profiling in police practice (Markúsdóttir, 2022). Additionally, outrage was sparked in 2020 when a picture surfaced in the media showing an on-duty female police officer wearing patches on her security vest considered hateful towards minority groups. The response from police authorities was to criticize the use of such patches, with no further consequences for the officer who wore them, or for others wearing similar patches (Bergsdóttir & Eyþórsdóttir, 2024). This happened shortly after 3,000 Icelanders demonstrated against police violence in the aftermath of the US case of George Floyd in the summer of 2020.

The denial of racism within the police in Iceland from police authorities and heads of police associations may reflect the claimed "color-blindness" of police forces in other Nordic countries. Schclarek Mulinari and Keskinen (2022) argue that Nordic police officers refuse to recognize the role of race and ethnicity in policing, claiming that their work is race-neutral and based only on relevant factors. They continue by interpreting this as indicative of a "color-blind ideology" prevalent in the Nordic welfare states, where an idealized community is imagined predominantly in terms of Nordic whiteness. This norm sets a benchmark against which "other" racial bodies are compared. This refers to Bonilla-Silva's (2015) work on colorblindness, where he argues that colorblind racism occurs when denials of racial differences in a given context or society serve to perpetuate and sustain racial inequalities. The responses of the Icelandic police, not recognizing experiences put forward by people with minority backgrounds in Iceland, could suggest that such "color-blindness" is also prevailing in Icelandic police.

Given the context of Iceland´s policing and societal dynamics—including a small and homogenous police force, reported negative attitudes towards female officers by their male counterparts, and rapid societal changes—it becomes increasingly important to examine the perspectives of police trainees on diversity. This inquiry could provide valuable insights into the future of policing in a rapidly evolving social landscape. Thus, the present study aims to examine the yearly trends in attitudes toward diversity in policing among newly recruited Icelandic police students. Additionally, the study investigates the specific diversity measures that these students support in policing and whether their support varies by characteristics such as gender, previous education, and age.

Methodology

Research Design

The current research used data collected from a survey administered to all newly recruited police students in Iceland from 2018 to 2023. The data collection was part of a larger longitudinal study, Recruitment, Education and Careers in the Police (the RECPOL project) (see Oddsson et al., 2020), which tracked the progress of police students in seven countries, including Iceland. The students received the survey via email in the first semester of their studies. Participants were given the instructions that the survey was anonymous and that their participation was voluntary.

Participants

Having previously been a one-year training program at the police academy, police training in Iceland was moved to a university level in 2016. All prospective police officers in Iceland must now take a two-year diploma in police science at the University of Akureyri. From 2016 to 2019, students were selected for the program after passing their first semester university courses and an entrance examination. In 2020, the admission process was changed so that only those who passed an entrance examination and certain requirements could enter the first semester. Thus, fewer students entered the program (and therefore participated in the survey) in 2020 and 2021. In 2022, the police science department at the University of Akureyri received extra funding to take in more students. These changes are reflected in the size of the incoming cohorts and, therefore, the number of participants each year shown in Table 1.

The diversity of the student body in terms of gender, age, and whether the students have a prior university degree when they enter the program has also varied through the years. While the majority of incoming students in 2018 were female (63.4%), they constituted less than a third (31.6%) in 2022. Over the period from 2018 to 2023, the overall difference in the proportion of male and female students was small, with 48% female students. In 2021, the proportion of students entering the program with a previous university degree was relatively high in comparison to other years, with over one-third (34.4%) having such education. The age distribution has been rather stable over these six years, with most students being between 20 and 24 years old.

Unfortunately, we do not know the racial or ethnic diversity of our participants as the survey did not include a question about ethnic background of the students. However, from questions about respondents and parental place of birth, we can conclude that there are no first-generation immigrants (respondent and both parents being born outside Iceland) and only one (less than 0.3%) second-generation immigrant (respondent being born in Iceland but both parents abroad). In terms of immigrant background, there is therefore considerably less diversity among prospective police officers than among the population in Iceland. About 30% of Iceland's population in the 20 to 30 age group are first generation immigrants (Statistics Iceland, 2024).

Measures

To capture attitudes towards diversity among prospective police officers in Iceland, we used three different dimensions. These were attitudes towards 1) minority representation in policing, 2) minority awareness education in policing, and 3) cultural sensitivity in policing. To assess *attitudes towards minority representation in policing*, the students received a question about their views on the importance of the composition of the police force to reflect the size of different minority groups in the population (women, immigrants, non-white people, Muslims, Jewish people, Polish people, gay people, and transgender people). As Polish people constitute the largest immigrant group in Iceland (Statistics Iceland, 2024), we asked specifically about that group. The answer choices ranged from 1) *Not important at all* to 5) *Very important*. We aggregated responses from the eight survey items to construct a mean index ($\alpha = 0.98$, $M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.18$).

Second, to measure *attitudes towards minority awareness education in policing,* participants were asked, "Do you think it's important that police officers learn about issues related to the following? (gender, gender identity, queer issues, immigration, race, racism, different cultures, religion, different ethnicities, hate speech, and hate crime)". Principal component factor analyses revealed that the 11 survey items belong to three related but distinct factors: 1) *gender and queer issue*s, which was created by averaging three survey items ($\alpha = 0.94$, $M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.13$), 2) *cultural diversity* is the average score of five survey items ($\alpha = 0.88$, $M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.85$), and 3) *racism and hate crime* is the average score of three survey items ($\alpha = 0.88$, $M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.71$). The answer choices were the same as above.

Third, the measure for *attitudes towards cultural sensitivity in policing* was created by using the following survey question: "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Police officers need to adopt certain language/use of words to be respectful towards minority groups?". The answer choices ranged from 1) *Disagree completely* to 5) *Completely agree* ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.07$). In the findings, we analyze the annual trends in these different types of attitudes toward diversity and examine them by the students' gender, age, and whether they had previous higher education before entering the police program.

Analytical Strategy

In the results, we used different methods to analyze our data, depending on the measure being examined. In figure 1, we used a one-way ANOVA (analysis of variance) to determine whether there are statistically significant differences in the average scores of attitudes towards diversity in policing between different cohorts of first-year students over the six-year period.

In Table 2, we used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to estimate the relationships between students' characteristics (gender, age, and previous education) and attitudes towards diversity in policing. When examining what factors impact students' attitudes, OLS regression was appropriate because it allows for the quantification of the influence of multiple predictors on students' attitudes. By fitting a linear model to the data, OLS regression provides coefficients that indicate the strength and direction of each predictor's effect, helping to identify significant factors and understand their contributions to variations in students' attitudes. Prior to running the OLS models, we ensured that all OLS assumptions were satisfied.

Finally, Figures 2 and 3 present the proportion of all participants who considered various diversity measures in policing to be important. In Figure 4, we explored the differences in the proportion of participants who regard cultural sensitivity in policing as important, using a chi-square test to determine if there were significant differences based on students' gender, age, and prior education. A chi-square test is appropriate here as it assesses the association between categorical variables.

Findings

Table 1

Sample Demographics

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total sample
Gender							
Female	63.4%	51.6%	44.0%	39.4%	31.6%	45.5%	48.0%
Male	36.6%	48.4%	56.0%	60.6%	68.4%	54.5%	52.0%
Prior univ. Educ							
No	84.5%	83.0%	76.0%	65.6%	88.2%	80.0%	82.1%
Yes	15.2%	17.0%	24.0%	34.4%	11.8%	20.0%	17.9%
Age							
20-24 years old	63.0%	64,4%	72.0%	62.5%	50.0%	52.8%	59.8%
25-30 years old	27.2%	23.3%	16.0%	25.0%	32.4%	34.0%	27.3%
31 and older	9.8%	12.2%	12.0%	12.5%	17.6%	13.2%	12.8%
Response rate	**76.8%**	**77.1%**	**54.8%**	**72.0%**	**90.0%**	**80.1%**	
N	**93**	**95**	**25**	**33**	**76**	**55**	**377**

We begin our analyses by examining the annual trends in police students' attitudes towards various dimensions of diversity in policing, as illustrated in Figure 1. Each measure is quantified on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, with a score of 5 denoting the highest level of support. The overall trend indicates a slight increase in support among students in 2020 and 2021 compared to 2018, followed by a decline in 2023. However, none of these changes in attitudes over the six years are statistically significant. Notably, attitudes towards minority awareness education on racism, hate crime, and hate speech, as well as cultural sensitivity, show variations that are approaching significance, with *p*-values of 0.08 and 0.07, respectively. The support for both peaked in 2021 (at 4.6) but declined (to 4.2 and 3.9) in 2023. Interestingly, in 2023, the students were more inclined to support these diversity measures in policing compared to other forms. Throughout the years, minority representation in the police force garnered less support among police students than other diversity measures. Over the six years, the average support for the diversity measure receiving the most support (minority awareness education: Racism, hate crime, and hate speech) was significantly higher than all other types of diversity measures ($p < 0.01$).
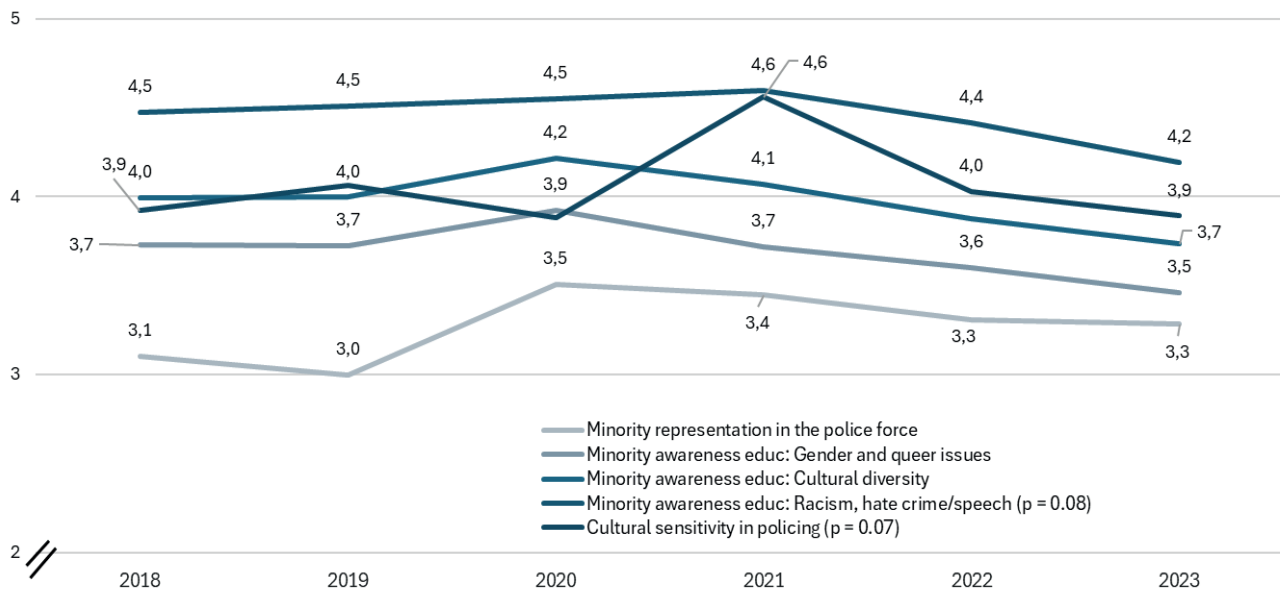
Figure 1

Annual Trends in Attitudes of Newly Recruited Police Students Towards Different Types of Diversity in Policing

Table 2 presents the results from an OLS regression analysis, examining the relationship between demographic characteristics of the police students and their attitudes towards various types of diversity in policing. Five models were assessed, each representing a different aspect of diversity. We created a dummy variable for gender where females were coded "1" and males "0", and a dummy variable for previous education where those entering the police program with a university degree were coded "1" and other students "0". The youngest age group (20 to 24) is the reference group for the two dummy variables for age. In Table 2, we report the unstandardized coefficient for the level of support.

In Model 1 (Table 2), which considers minority representation in the police force, none of the predictors are statistically significant. This suggests that attitudes towards minority representation do not vary by gender, whether the students have a prior university education, or their age. Model 2 reveals that females are more likely ($b = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$) to have positive attitudes towards learning about gender and queer issues, while no significant effects were found for prior university education or age. The adjusted R-squared value of 0.05 indicates that 5% of the variance in attitudes towards gender and queer issues can be explained by the included predictors.
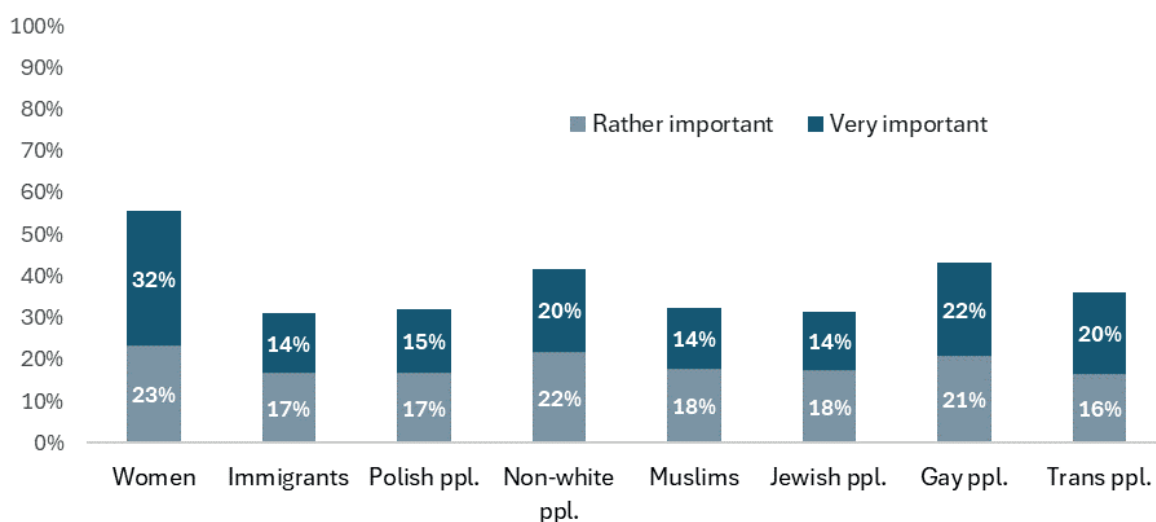
For Model 3, which addresses attitudes toward learning about cultural diversity, both the variables for females ($b = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$) and for age group 25 to 30 ($b = -0.23$, $p < 0.05$) are significant, suggesting that gender and age are associated with attitudes towards cultural diversity among police students. Females and students in the youngest age group were more supportive of this type of education than other students. Likewise, focusing on attitudes towards learning about racism, hate crime, and speech, in Model 4, females ($b = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$), and students in the youngest age group were significantly more likely to be supportive of learning about racism, hate crime, and speech. Having a prior university education only impacted the attitudes toward cultural sensitivity in policing (Model 5, $b = 041$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 2

OLS Regression on Attitudes of Newly Recruited Police Students Towards Different Types of Diversity in Policing

	Minority representation in the police force	Minority awareness educ: Gender and queer	Minority awareness educ: Cultural diversity	Minority awareness educ: Racism, hate crime/speech	Cultural sensitivity in policing
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	b	*b*	*b*	*b*	*b*
Female	0.03	0.48**	0.31**	0.21**	0.25*
Prior university educ.	0.22	0.09	0.19	0.08	0.41*
Age group 25 to 30	-0.21	-0.18	-0.23*	-0.19*	-0.21
Age group 31 and older	-0.03	-0.29	-0.26+	-0.26*	-0.19
F-value	1.24	5.24**	5.67**	4.32**	3.51**
Adj. Rsq.	0.00	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.03
N	303	350	359	359	327

***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, +$p < 0.10$

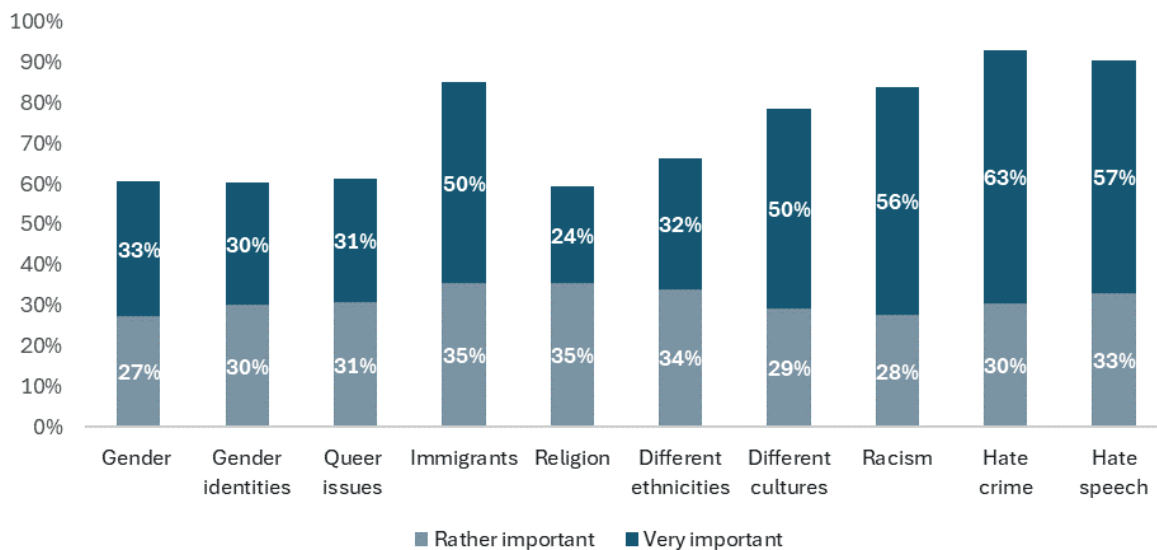*b* = Unstanderdized coefficient

In Figure 2, we break down attitudes towards minority representation in the police force by showing the results for each survey item about each minority group. The stacked bar graph displays the proportion of respondents who deemed it *Rather important* versus *Very important* for the police force to proportionally represent each group. Just over half of the students found the representation of women important (a combined total of 55%). Over 40% of the students considered it very or rather important that non-white and gay people be represented in the police force. Notably, a slightly higher proportion of students supported the police being proportionally represented by Polish people (32%) than by other immigrants (31%). This is perhaps not surprising as not only do Polish people make up the largest proportion of immigrants in Iceland but also Iceland now has a substantial population of second-generation immigrants with a Polish background (Statistics Iceland, 2024).

Figure 2

Attitudes Towards Minority Representation in the Police Force: Do you think the composition of police officers should reflect the size of the following groups?

Most students acknowledged the necessity of learning about hate speech and hate crime, with 57% and 63%, respectively, classifying it as *Very important* (Figure 3). Over 90% of the students viewed these topics as at least rather important. Conversely, gender and queer issues received a more moderate recognition of importance. Fewest students viewed learning about religion as important, but still over half considered it either rather or very important. A large proportion of students attributed high importance to including topics about immigrants, different cultures, and racism in the educational curriculum for prospective police officers. The findings in Figure 3 suggest a somewhat broad acknowledgment among recruits of the value of comprehending a diverse range of societal issues within the scope of their training.

Figure 3

Attitudes Towards Minority Awareness in Police Education: Do you Think it's Important that Police Officers Learn about Issues Related to the Following?
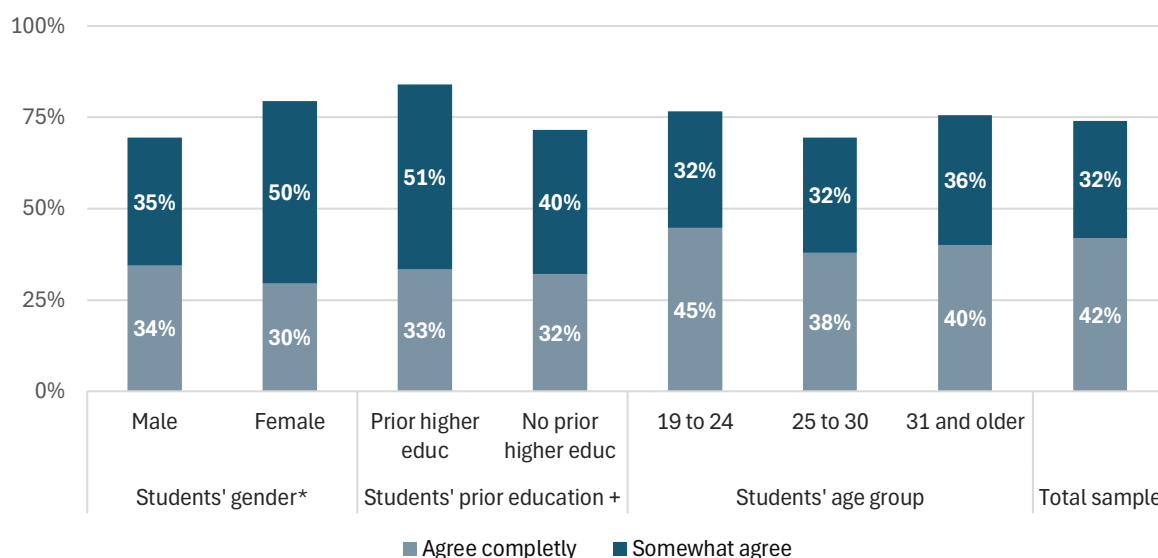

Finally, Figure 4 depicts the distribution of attitudes among police students toward cultural sensitivity in language use when engaging with minority groups. The respondents' level of agreement is stratified by gender, previous education, and age group, as well as showing the aggregate response from the total sample. Notably, a significantly higher percentage of female students agreed with the statement compared to male students ($p < 0.05$). This trend continues with students who have had prior higher education (51% *Agree completely*) versus those without (40% *Agree completely*). The difference in attitudes towards cultural sensitivity in policing between students who had prior higher education when they started their police studies and those who did not is only significant using a 90% confidence level ($p = 0.09$).

When compared by age, the youngest age group, 19 to 24 years, was slightly more likely to support using cultural sensitivity in language use when engaging with minorities. However, the difference by age was not significant. Overall, the participants demonstrated an acknowledgment of the importance of respectful language, with 32% agreeing completely and an additional 42% somewhat agreeing. Still, these findings suggest that about one quarter (26%) of these incoming students do not understand the critical role of language in fostering cultural sensitivity within police practice.

Figure 4

Attitudes Towards Cultural Sensitivity in Policing: How Much do you Agree or Disagree with the Following Statement? Police Officers Need to Adopt Certain Language/Use of Words to be Respectful Towards Minority Groups

Discussion

Over the past three decades, Iceland has transitioned from a predominantly homogeneous society to a more diverse one, largely due to significant immigration (Statistics Iceland, 2024). These demographic changes present both opportunities and challenges, particularly for law enforcement. While the interaction between police and minority groups has been extensively studied in many Western nations (e.g., McFarland et al., 2018; Solhjell et al., 2019; Yesufu, 2013), this topic remains largely unexplored in Iceland. Research from other Nordic countries consistently highlights discriminatory practices by the police, leading to a lack of trust in law enforcement (Kääriäinen & Niemi, 2014; Solhjell et al., 2019).

Police cultures, while diverse, often share traits such as strong in-group bias, hegemonic masculinities, and resistance to external scrutiny, which can contribute to discriminatory practices (Loftus, 2009; Steinþórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2022; Westmarland, 2008). This raises the question of whether new police recruits are socialized into these cultures or if those who choose policing as a career are predisposed to less tolerant views (Fielding, 2023). Understanding the attitudes of prospective police officers is therefore important.

In this study, we surveyed all prospective police officers in Iceland from 2018 to 2023 to explore their attitudes towards diversity measures in policing. Our findings indicate generally positive support for diversity measures, with some variation over time. Support peaked in the 2020 and 2021 cohorts, with a decline in subsequent years. This fluctuation may correlate with changes in the selection process, suggesting that more stringent admission criteria might attract candidates more open to diversity.

Interestingly, while there was consistent support for minority awareness education focusing on racism, hate crimes, and hate speech, support for actual minority representation within the force was less robust. This may be due to the heightened media focus on hate crimes in Iceland in recent years. In the Icelandic context, "hate crime" is an umbrella term for criminal acts that are motivated by bias or prejudice (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], 2009) and speech that is hateful (Eyþórsdóttir, 2023). Furthermore, since 2017, police education in Iceland has included courses on recognizing and investigating hate crimes, which may have influenced these attitudes. However, this could also indicate that recruits prioritize addressing racism externally rather than fostering diversity within the police force itself.

Regarding increasing diversity within the force, students were more supportive of increasing the number of female officers than other types of diversity. Still, over 40% of incoming students believed that the police force should reflect the diversity of Iceland's population, including non-white and LGBTQ+ individuals. Female recruits, in particular, showed greater support for diversity, reflecting broader societal trends toward inclusivity. We also found that recruits with prior higher education were

more supportive of cultural sensitivity in policing, such as adopting respectful language toward minority groups. The youngest students were more likely to support cultural diversity.

Study's Limitations and Future Research

A significant limitation of this study is the absence of comparative data from the general public. This limits our ability to assess whether the attitudes of police recruits are reflective of broader societal views or specific to those seeking careers in policing. Future research should address this gap by comparing these attitudes with those of the general public and other professional groups. Given the significant societal changes in Iceland and the critical role of the police in managing these changes, it is important to continuously monitor and foster positive attitudes towards diversity among police recruits.

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on policing in a rapidly diversifying society. As Iceland becomes more diverse, it is essential that its institutions, including law enforcement, evolve accordingly. While there is evident support for diversity among prospective police officers, translating this support into concrete action remains a challenge. Policymakers must prioritize diversity not only as a societal value but as a fundamental aspect of effective and equitable policing. This will require ongoing training, thoughtful recruitment, and the development of an institutional culture that values inclusivity at all levels.

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