

DIGIPOL

Digitalizing the police: internal and external challenges for the police organization in an inclusive society

DURATION
01/12/2022 – 30/11/2026

BUDGET
€ 785 670

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Policing is experiencing rapid transformation whereby contemporary daily police work and encounters with citizens (external), but also with other police officers and superior (internal), are increasingly mediated by technology. Motivated by efficiency and objective outputs, that trend leaves the question of its impact on more discrete outcomes associated to frontline police work unanswered.

The DIGIPOL research aims to study how the process of digitalisation through technologies such as body-worn cameras, Mobile Data Terminals and multi-tenant platforms for front line police work, as well as analysis software's, affects the everyday work of the Belgian local police. Moreover, it aims to gain insight in how the emergence of technology in the police organization changes the workplace and working conditions, the internal working relationships and police-public relations. Particular attention will be put on how technology should contribute to police's efficiency on one hand and police legitimacy on the other. Within an inclusive society police-public relationships are important breeding-grounds for trust in state and police trust. The project questions how the expansion of technology-mediated interactions affects organizational legitimacy as well as police legitimacy as a whole.

The objectives of DIGIPOL are threefold:

- 1) Understanding the changing nature of the day-to-day work of frontline police officers, their working conditions and internal hierarchical relations in the digital era.
- 2) Understanding the process of digitalisation, how technology is being incorporated in the police organisations, their strategies and work processes, at the local level as well as at the federal level, and its impact on organizational justice.
- 3) Understanding the use of technology in daily basic policing activities of front-line police officers and how this affects frontline 'policing' and police-public relations.

In order to meet these objectives, DIGIPOL mobilizes former interdisciplinary research experience as well as methodological insights from different scientific research fields (policing studies, labour and surveillance studies, anthropology of bureaucracy and sociology of organization). In this, the research consortium chooses an inductive approach whereby activities of frontline police officers and executive police officers (e.g. supervisors) will be studied 'in situ'. To that effect, DIGIPOL will combine classic qualitative methods: (policy) document analysis, participant observation and semi-directive interviews, with more collaborative ones: workshops with field officers, meetings of the professional guidance committee and ad hoc steering meetings with each police force involved in the project.

DIGIPOL will increase and update knowledge about the impact of technology and technology-mediated interactions on 'police and policing'. The research also generates more insight into the functioning of the police organisation, who are considered 'closed public organisations'. For the organization itself it contributes to their aim for more accountability and transparency. Other than that, the research result might also be of added value for other first-line security organizations like fire brigades and public security servants, who are also challenged by the technological revolution.

It will constitute a valuable source of feedback for decision makers, providing them with tailor-made guidelines and helping them to face procurement challenges of new technological devices. It will also uncover best practices and provide tools helping to face some of the challenges of the implementation of technological devices: for example, calls for proposal, support actions such as intern training, implementation actions, etc. which position more favorably the pilots of the organisation for the purpose of ensuring the proper use of the technology. Even more so since it is intertwined with fundamental legal and ethical stakes inherent to the police institution (such as its ability to avoid undue discrimination, but rather to promote inclusion).



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Through its collaborative nature, this project will produce a very practical and relevant knowledge for police partners and other institutional decision-makers (especially Federal Public Services Justice and Interior). The practical character of that knowledge is further reinforced by the fact that this project is designed to cover situations related to the three different regions of Belgium and bring together cases in both French- and Dutch speaking contexts.

Insights in daily problems and the impact of technology on working conditions, the function of police and daily policing will be very relevant for both, (direct) managers within the local police and policymakers of the federal police who are involved in the IT development. Added to that, the research will possibly contain valuable information for those responsible for the welfare and wellbeing of police officers (HR and unions). Tenslotte moeten de onderzoeksresultaten ook leiden tot richtlijnen en tools om de implementatie en de acceptatie van nieuwe technologieën in het werkveld te bevorderen en de weerstand tegen het gebruik van technologie te verminderen. In die zin hoopt het onderzoek ook goede praktijken en concrete tools te genereren die de invoering van nieuwe technologie in het werkveld moeten bevorderen, vb. opleidingen van politieambtenaren om bepaalde technologie te kunnen gebruiken. The interest of DIGIPOL's police partners and various end-users also lies in the production of guidelines that facilitate the implementation and acceptance of new technologies in the field. The research thusly hopes to generate best practices and concrete tools that help steer that change and train officers to use those devices.

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