

Abstract – Can I see your ID please? A qualitative research into police stops carried out by the Belgian local police

Carrying out a police stop is one of the tasks that police officers perform on a daily basis and which, at first sight, seems rather trivial. However, a closer look at this police practice reveals that it is about more than checking identity data. In the first place, it involves an interaction between the police and the citizen that helps to determine the shape of the relationship of trust between both parties. In addition, the police - as gatekeeper - has the power to determine who ends up in the criminal justice system by carrying out a simple check. In this way, a police stop becomes an intrusive action that can have a far-reaching impact on the lives of citizens.

These findings aroused the interest of many scientists, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries. From the series of studies that followed, important findings on the application of police stops emerged, which were mainly based on data obtained from citizens. Although such results can provide valuable insights, the study of police stops from a police perspective is equally important. Therefore, this PhD study has attempted to gain insight into the initial reasons for a police check and the way in which it is carried out, by letting police officers express themselves and keeping in mind the professional context in which they operate.

The findings presented in this thesis are derived from an ethnographic study of two local police forces, whose names and characteristics will not be discussed further for reasons of confidentiality. In addition to conducting observations for a total of approximately 750 hours in both general (e.g. intervention and traffic policing) and specialised police departments, 37 police officers from these departments were interviewed. The results show that the practice of police stops takes shape at the macro, meso and micro levels. Before a stop is effectively carried out, a process of suspicion is formed in the mind of the police officer involved, which is influenced by, among other things, a (rather vague) legislation (macro), the police force and the service to which the police officer belongs, as well as the organisational culture that characterizes the police profession (meso), and the police officer's own personality and gut feeling (micro). This study shows that looking for 'suspicious' behaviour is synonymous with looking for 'deviant' behaviour, for behaviour that is 'different'. This 'deviant' behaviour is usually based on stereotypical ideas present in police circles, which makes certain people more likely than others to be subjected to police stops.

Not every citizen regarded as 'suspicious' is requested to show his/her identity card. Here again, factors from the three levels mentioned above play a role, such as the political policy being pursued at the time (macro), the priorities of the department in which the police officer works (meso) and the attitude of the citizen (micro).

In other words, carrying out a police stop is not a black and white story and can create a feeling of arbitrariness in citizens' minds, even if the police officer does not (consciously) have the intention to act in a discriminating way. This thesis therefore argues for a qualitative form of recording of police stops, so that it is clear to all parties who, where, when and why was stopped.