

# Community Policing in Rural Parts of Slovenia in the time of COVID-19<sup>1</sup>

**Katja Eman** (ORCID: 0000-0002-1519-822X)

Associate Professor of Criminology  
Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security  
University of Maribor, Slovenia

**Tinkara Bulovec** (ORCID: 0000-0003-4544-7706)

Researcher and Doctoral Student  
Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security  
University of Maribor, Slovenia

**Correspondence:** Katja Eman; [katja.eman@um.si](mailto:katja.eman@um.si)

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### **Abstract**

The focus of community policing is directly on the local community and encompasses various crime reduction and crime preventive initiatives developed and initiated through the interaction of police and local citizens. The history of the development of community policing in Slovenia has shown that, for a thriving community policing approach, police officers had to work actively and hard for many years and cooperate with local leaders and citizens from both rural and urban local communities in various ways to make positive progress. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed police activities and interfered with community policing throughout Slovenia, especially in its rural regions. This article reviews the organization of community policing in eight rural Slovene police directorates. Interviews were conducted with community policing authorities at regional and local levels in all eight police directorates. We found that community policing changed significantly during the pandemic (e.g. use of Facebook, Zoom) and decreased, because police officers were occupied with performing other tasks (e.g. security measures related to the epidemiological situation). The most disadvantaged communities were located in rural areas, where contacts with citizens were almost completely cut off. Unfortunately, the most significant obstacle to community policing practices is long-term staffing shortages of the Slovenian police.

**Keywords:** community policing; rural environment; rural policing; COVID-19; Slovenia

## Introduction

This article reviews the organization of community policing in eight rural Slovene police directorates. All actions carried out by personnel from these directorates, as an organization, can be described as police activities. Community policing is an approach that focuses directly on the local community and encompasses various crime reduction and crime preventive initiatives developed and initiated through the interaction of police and local citizens. From a community policing perspective, Lobnikar, Modic and Sotlar (2019) describe police officers as security managers of the local community, pointing out that the community itself must perceive the police as such. Meško (2001) identifies different ways of implementing community policing, the most well-known being the work of police officers acting as community policing officers. Their task is to know the community or district where they work, know current and specific problems in their area, raise awareness, and present police activities in the form of various presentations and lectures.

In recent decades, policing has increasingly become a knowledge-based approach to safety and security, including accelerated introduction of information and communication technology, the digitalization of policing, the use of geographic information systems (GIS) to map crime hotspots, increase reliance on DNA evidence to investigate crime, the pursuit of criminal intelligence activities, and evidence-based approaches of public order and peace and knowledge-based policing in communities. Due to the use of information and data in their work, supported by raising educational standards and necessary competencies for police officers, the nature of police work significantly changed, making it comparable to other well-developed professions (Meško et al., 2019; Prislán & Lobnikar, 2020). However, community policing has changed significantly since early 2020 due to COVID-19. As noted by Laufs and Waseem (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic led to a range of unforeseen and unprecedented challenges for police worldwide.

In Slovenia, police officers possess broad powers to take care of the security and maintenance of public order in the country (Dvojmoč, Lobnikar & Modic, 2014), based on the Police Duties and Powers Act (Zakon o nalogah in pooblastilih policije [ZNPPol], 2013). The Act regulates the tasks and powers of the police, as well as their implementation, in order to ensure the security of the individual and the community, to maintain respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and to strengthen the rule of law.

Standard police forms of work, specified in ZNPPol (2013), have been upgraded with crime preventive activities, especially at the local community level, that complement the goals of crime repression (Lobnikar, Prislán, and Modic, 2016a). At the local level, policing is carried out within regional police stations, districts and offices. Tičar (2015) emphasizes that police stations are not tied to local communities and municipalities. Instead, the police station is a regional

police organizational unit for directing police tasks in a specific area of the country or a specific area of work. Hence, the police are mostly autonomous in their work.

### **Slovenian Police and Community Policing**

It can be argued that community policing is the most commonly chosen approach to solving problems and challenges in local communities and is based on the participation of citizens and police officers in solving security problems (Meško, 2001). Lobnikar and Prislan (2017, p. 133) point out that previously the Slovenian police worked in various ways to improve the implementation of tasks and powers at the organizational and strategic level, with particular emphasis on ensuring security in local communities. A modern strategy of police activity is in force, where community policing is characterized by: (i) partnerships between the police and the community; (ii) problem solving-oriented police work; (iii) decentralization of police services; and (iv) implementation of various crime prevention activities. Police officers need to continuously improve their credibility and as authorities about security and safety by members of the community through utilization of knowledge-based methods (for example, community-based policing), ensuring the legitimacy of their actions, and strengthening the legitimacy of knowledge-based fact-finding (Ministry of the Interior, Police, 2013, 2018; Meško, 2001).

Police work has undoubtedly evolved throughout the development of the Republic of Slovenia. Even though community policing really began in 1998 with the adoption of the Police Act (Zakon o policiji [ZPol], 1998), the tasks, powers, and laws regarding the police, their priorities and their procedures have changed significantly over the years. In addition to the Police Tasks and Powers Act (ZNPPol], 2013), community policing is defined at the local level by the Community Policing Strategy (Ministry of the Interior, Police, 2013), the Resolution on the National Programme for the Prevention and Suppression of Crime 2019–2023 (Resolucija o nacionalnem programu preprečevanja in zatiranja kriminalitete za obdobje 2019–2023 [ReNPPZK19–23], 2019), and the Medium-Term Plan for Police Development and Work for 2018–2022 (Ministry of the Interior, Police, 2018). The key message to be taken from these documents is that policing can only be effective when officers are present in the community and work with residents to identify and address the causes of local security and safety issues.

In 2013, the Slovenian Police adopted a Community Policing Strategy, thus committing itself to and directing police work towards a community-centric approach (Ministry of the Interior, Police, n. d. a.). It follows from the goals of community policing that police work in cooperation with the community must be of high quality and aimed at eliminating security problems as soon as possible. The result of such work is an increased sense of security on the part of local community residents and, consequently, their satisfaction both in general and with the work of the police. In essence, a community policing strategy (Ministry of the Interior, Police, 2013) emphasizes the importance of partnerships between the police and the local

community and civil society, the need for greater independence of police stations – which must adapt their activities to the security needs and interests of the local community – and greater trust between, and the satisfaction of the police and the population (Ministry of the Interior, Police, n. d. b).

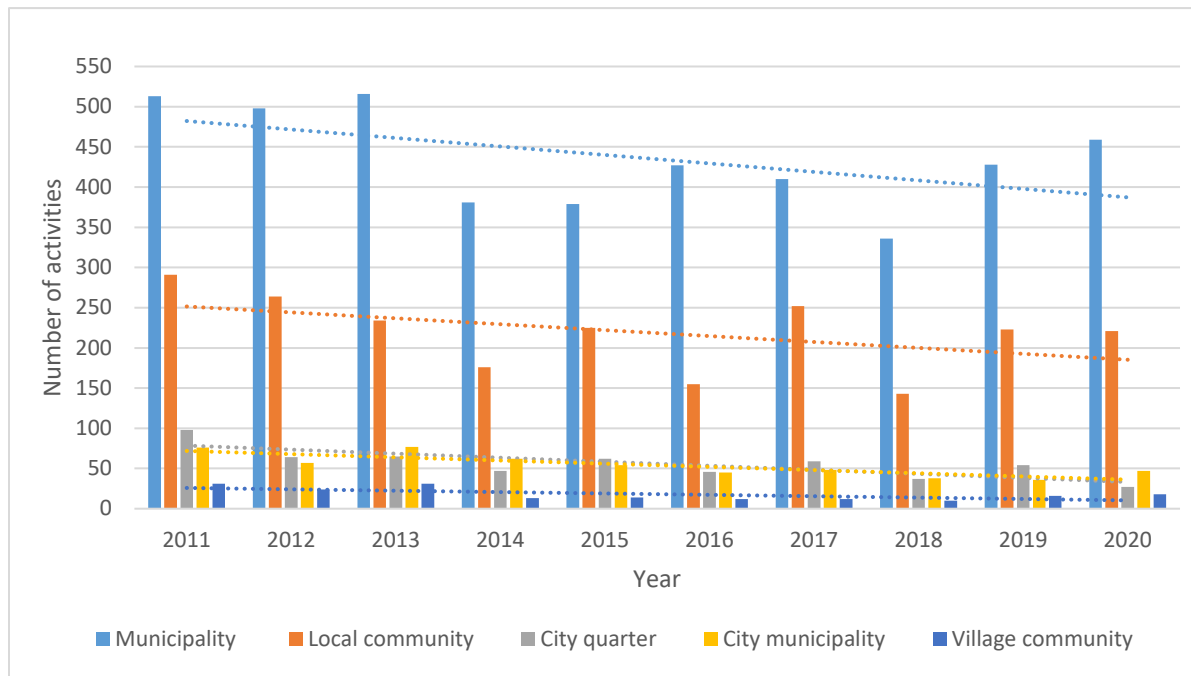
Since the foundation of a good and thriving community policing approach is based on mutual trust between the police and the population, time is required and, above all, positive experiences of citizens with the police. It is crucial that all police employees are aware that their work primarily serves the people. In other words, as stated by one police station commander: “...community policing must be lived and worked. If you do not have that in yourself, you will never be successful at community policing or satisfied with doing your job...”. For optimal effectiveness, all police officers and criminal investigators must be aware of the importance of community policing in every contact made with citizens, regardless of what kind of work and at what level they perform it. Furthermore, all crime prevention and crime control measures must be carried out professionally, ethically, humanely, fairly and without conflict. Integrity and respect in interpersonal communications must always come first in successful community policing.

The history of the development of community policing in Slovenia has shown that for community policing to be successful, police officers have to work actively and hard for many years and cooperate with the local community in a multiplicity of ways to show positive results. Since 2020, the situation associated with COVID-19 has significantly changed police activities and negatively affected community policing. Due to urgent work in other areas, community policing in many parts of Slovenia was either suspended or not implemented at all. However, as Figure 1 indicates, there is again an uptick in community policing activities. Nonetheless, the extent of damage caused by a lessening of community policing efforts can only be known in the years to come.

Rural crime and justice studies increasingly showcase the differences between the implementation of community policing in rural and urban settings. We want to emphasize that there are no differences in the legislation that would prescribe different forms of work depending on the type of community environment, so we can conclude that other factors cause the differences (e.g. rural community environments or the way police officers work in rural localities). Although the same legal provisions bind all police officers, the performance of police duties in both settings may differ. Moreover, Hacin and Eman (2019) found that policing in Slovenia is highly dependent on the environment in which it is carried out. These place-based effects can be seen in Figure 1, which shows a graph of community policing activities implemented directly in different local communities between 2011 and 2020 (Ministry of the Interior, Police, 2021).

**Figure 1**

*Community policing activities in various local community settings in Slovenia from 2011 to 2020*



**Source:** Ministry of the Interior, Police, 2020a

In general, there was a decline in community policing over the 10-year period, with a slight increase in 2020. Nonetheless, community policing activities are not as numerous as they were previously. As information becomes available, we will be able to ascertain if community policing activities rebounded in 2021, 2022 and beyond. Figure 1 also shows that significantly more community policing is done in urban environments, especially at the level of municipalities.

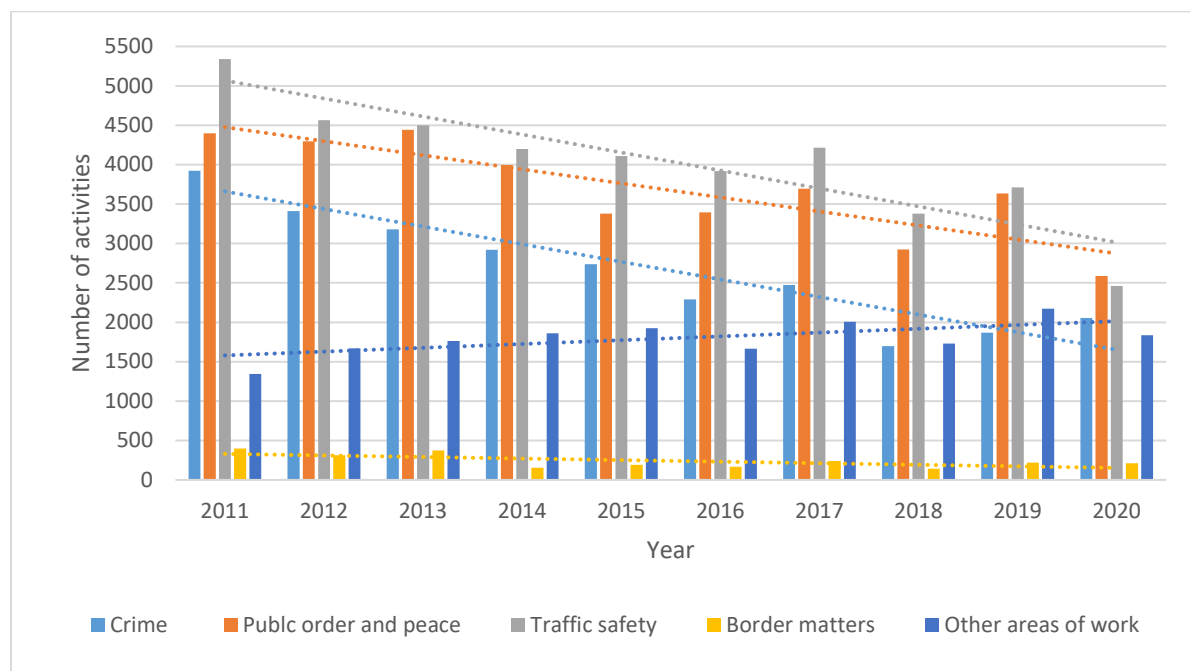
In Slovenia, in theory, there exists good conditions and predispositions for community-based police work in rural communities. The inhabitants of rural areas are more likely interconnected, that is, know each other. They also are more likely to assess current community policing efforts relatively favorably, have relatively low fear of crime, and perceive police officers as polite (Lobnikar et al., 2016b). Additionally, the readiness for cooperation with the police – which is crucial for effective police work – is higher in rural than urban areas. However, as noted by Pirnat and Meško (2020), the population's general attitude towards the police is also important for police legitimacy. Despite good conditions in rural areas for community policing, statistical data shows a different outcome. From Figure 1, we can see that by far the least number of community-policing practices take place directly at the level of village communities. The lack of community policing in rural areas (e.g. village communities) can be partially explained by a

focus on strengthening community policing in urban areas, where more crime and disorder is perceived and attitudes toward the police are less favorable (Lobnikar et al., 2016b). Meško et al. (2013) point out that such research led to the implementation of community policing mainly to solve individual problems in specific urban areas and not as a comprehensive approach to policing.

The areas and quantity of crime prevention efforts and community policing (crime reduction, traffic safety, and public order and peace) are shown in Figure 2. Specifically, Figure 2 shows a significant decline in preventive work in traffic safety, crime and public order and peace. In contrast, other activities carried out by the police have increased. In total, police officers carried out 11,607 activities related to crime prevention efforts and community policing in 2019, and in 2020 much less, namely 9,145 (Ministry of the Interior, Police, 2021). Such a decline can be mainly explained by the pandemic and consequent turn of the focus of police activities to curbing COVID-19's spread.

**Figure 2**

*Police activities related to crime prevention and community policing in Slovenia from 2011 to 2020*



**Source:** Ministry of the Interior, Police, 2021

In June 2021, the Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security at the University of Maribor organized a roundtable called “Community-oriented police work – proclaimed the leading

activity of the Slovenian police or a myth?”<sup>2</sup> Discussants considered the philosophical, strategic, tactical and organizational perspectives of community policing. The main points made by roundtable participants included: (i) policing in general is one of the main ways in Slovenia and other countries to alleviate society's problems in local communities and thus help ensure safety and security; and (ii) it is essential to be aware that community policing is the responsibility of both police officers and residents who can achieve a higher level of security and mutual trust through effective and constructive communication. The roundtable participants pointed out the difficulties in implementing community policing in general, and in recent times, due to the situation related to lockdowns and other restrictions on public gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They stressed that community policing should be redesigned to bring people in both urban and rural areas closer to policing in ways that reduce crime and improve security.

To verify individual statements from the roundtable discussion, the purpose of this article is to review the practice of community policing at all three levels of police activity – local, regional and national. For this purpose, we conducted interviews with those responsible for community policing in the general police directorate for Slovenia; at the state level with directors or police officers; and at the regional level at police directorates and community policing officers as stakeholders of community policing working from police stations at the local level.

We found that community policing changed or decreased with the onset of the COVID pandemic, but has recovered slightly already. Respondents noted that enforcement efforts in carrying out security-related tasks during the pandemic caused citizens to significantly lose trust in their local police force. The primary police mission of serving the people was supplanted to a considerable degree by police actions related to enforcement of masking, lockdowns and other efforts to stem the spread of COVID-19 and its associated health consequences. Therefore, two key questions arise. How and where to go with community policing in the future as the COVID-19 pandemic declines? Can community policing be returned to what it used to be in Slovenia?

### **Community Policing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and COVID-19 as a New, Inevitable Challenge**

Community policing is described in the scholarly literature as a model of policing focused on the cooperation of police with the public in promoting community safety. Community policing is supposed to ensure the contribution of the police to strengthening democracy in societies, the legitimacy of governance and the belief on the part of citizens that the police serve the people, hence, leading to more trust and cooperation with the police.

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<sup>2</sup> The roundtable was moderated by Gorazd Meško. Invited experts were Darko Anželj, Tomaž Pečjak, Damir Ivančić and Marija Mikulan from the Police. Mayor Peter Misja was a representative of the local community, and Branko Lobnikar and Maja Modic from academia.



De Maillard and Terpstra (2021) are among scholars who criticize community policing. They describe it as a so-called mantra which should be equally understood by the police and citizens to have positive effect on safety and security if it is to be effective. However, shortcomings in philosophy, strategies, tactics, techniques and organizational perspectives leads to considerable ambiguities that negate possible positive influences from attempts to implement and sustain community policing activities. They note that community policing is a popular activity adopted by many countries in transition without a long-standing democratic tradition, but has been carried out in very different ways from one country to the next. The models of community policing transmitted from the West by multiple intermediaries differed, so it is impossible to discuss a single model of community policing.

After initial enthusiasm, the development of distinctive models for community policing took the concept in different directions, but implementation also was uneven across agencies with the same countries due to various personnel, organizational and political reasons. De Maillard and Terpstra (2021) present examples of community policing undertaken in France (with a Napoleonic tradition of policing) and the Netherlands (in a socially homogeneous country with a high level of trust in the police), followed by examples of community policing in England and the United States, and also include examples from Northern Ireland and South Africa (as examples of post-conflict transition environments). These examples revealed problems with placing community policing in the socio-political environment of many countries – requirements for strict maintenance of public order and peace, strict punishment of perpetrators of crimes and misdemeanors, creating social inequality, ethnic tensions, the disappearance of social policy – that are not conducive to so-called community policing practices. Besides, aspects of the professional and social identity of police officers are also important (police officers who do community policing are sometimes called ‘social workers’ by other officers, which puts them in a marginal position in the organization). De Maillard and Terpstra (2021) add that the most ambitious reforms called for by community policing have not been carried out and that adopting the mantra without the reform can lead to masking the fact that traditional modes of policing continue.

Cordner (2014) explains that two models currently situate community policing as an important form of policing in the twenty-first century. In the first model, community policing is seen as the basis for all other types of policing, but only on a declarative level and not in practice. The second model conceives community policing as the work of specialist police officers who are appropriately trained to work with different groups of people, especially in environments where there is a high level of conflict. In addition to using traditional methods, they try to resolve matters following the principles of proportionality, gradualness, fairness and other ideals of the police profession, and above all, by seeking support from the population and reaching consensus on action. Bowling et al. (2019) find that the police force in England, which has served for decades as an example to other police forces around the world, changed the

priorities of community policing during times of restrictive budgeting. Ideals of ‘democratic policing’, or police activities in a democratic society, can change overnight, and enforcement practices, discrimination, sophisticated forms of state violence, surveillance and other activities in local communities that have nothing to do with democratic principles, cooperation, consensus-building and social peace, can be hidden under this name. These, however, depend more on an agency’s prevailing policy than on the police officers who perform daily police work.

In England, another feature can be observed that indicates that community policing is changing – including its name – and affecting citizen-police relations. Historically, England had local security partnerships similar to Slovenian security councils that were heavily funded, but they were abolished during the last economic downturn in the British economy and the implementation of austerity measures. Due to local residents’ perceptions of police alienation from the population, England introduced regional political control over police activity with citizens who go by the name “trustees”, whom people can call, email or invite to their neighborhoods to sort things out with the police commissioner in charge of the region. The trustee is a regional politician who intermediates between people, the police and parliament. In recent years, community policing has been renamed as neighborhood policing, which is reminiscent of the work of Slovenian police officers in local communities, neighborhoods or former security districts. The above mentioned only confirms that community policing in different countries is based on similar ideas but may differ in the precise forms of its implementation. Community policing is one of the crucial activities of the police, based on the principles of cooperation, ensuring the constitutional right to security, proportionality, and above all, preventive work that creates an environment where people feel safe.

Laufs and Waseem (2020) analysed 72 studies about policing and the pandemic from countries around the world and discovered that the COVID-19 pandemic caused several issues, such as: (i) various challenges for police-community relations; (ii) negative effects on the mental health and wellbeing of police officers; (iii) disruptions to intra-organizational dynamics of police departments; and (iv) challenges to inter-agency cooperation, communication and collaboration.

A lack of knowledge and understanding of COVID-19 can result in discrimination and mistreatment of infected persons on the part of the police, therefore police must design adequate messaging and social media strategies to efficiently use online communication to interact with people in local communities. Furthermore, a health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic can increase the likelihood that police officers will suffer from psychological stress, posttraumatic stress, depression and anxiety (Laufs & Waseem, 2020).

We agree with Meško and Tankebe (2015) that attributing significance to the social function of policing in a community is extremely important, as conflicts that arise in certain parts

of society are dealt with by the police, who also need appropriate knowledge and approaches, and above all, the will of the police leadership to support such work. Legitimacy, procedural fairness, respect for the principle of proportionality and a police force that serves the people testify to the importance of these perspectives (Manning, 2016).

In Slovenia, community policing has been studied in great detail in recent decades, but a shift from theory to practice is needed, especially in the interest of crime and policing in rural areas. As elsewhere in Europe, Slovenia lacks understanding of the philosophy, strategies, tactics and methods of community policing that consider the organizational culture and social environment where community policing actually occurs. Additionally, the effects of COVID-19, which has greatly changed how society operates, must also be considered in relation to community policing.

During the pandemic, police officers had to perform additional tasks, from escorting convoys, trucks and buses, to being present at internal borders and implementing measures to restrict movement and gathering people in public areas. According to the epidemiological assessments of the National Institute of Public Health, the measures and conditions for crossing state borders changed very quickly, to which the work of police officers had to be adjusted.

Access to updated information is crucial for both the external public (citizens and foreigners who travelled to Slovenia) and police officers because recommendations, legal regulations, and rules for action during the epidemic changed rapidly and were challenging to follow. The police published daily press releases, warnings and preventive advice on their websites, police social networks and through the media. A call center within the police station was also available for epidemic-related information. The police restricted residents' visits to police stations for all non-essential matters in order to protect the health of employees and the health of people. A campaign comprised of several institutions and individuals, including the police, spontaneously arose on social networks under the motto "*We are here for you, please stay at home for us!*", showing some presence of community policing in the time of the pandemic.

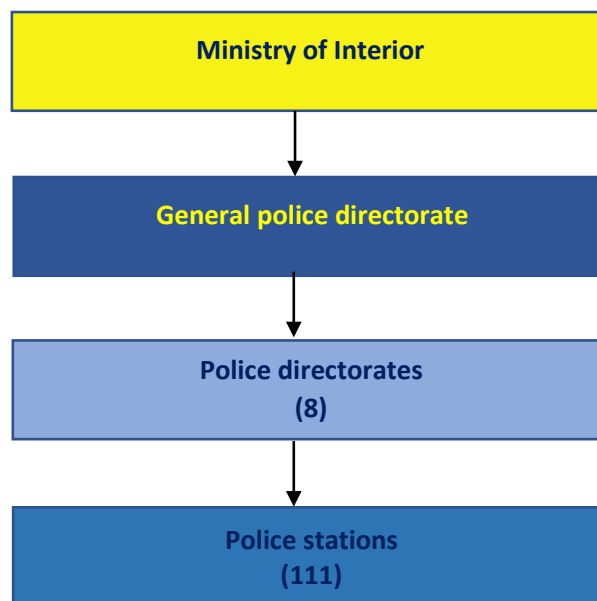
Throughout the pandemic, despite other additional tasks, activities related to traffic safety were still carried out, focusing more on the prevention of driving under the influence of alcohol, speed, using seat belts and awareness of motorcyclists. In the field of crime, active attention was paid to online security, which posed a risk due to work and distance learning in the form of online fraud and scams, online blackmail, and sexual harassment. Due to individuals spending increased time at home, the problem of domestic violence was also highlighted as problematic (Ministry of the Interior, Police, 2020).

## Methods

The organization of the Slovenian police consists of the General Police Directorate, eight Police directorates and 111 Police stations, as shown in Figure 3. Regarding the functioning of police as an organization, it should be noted that it is a body within the Ministry of Interior. Besides, it is one of the largest organizations in the Republic of Slovenia. Therefore, it has a transparent system of labour division at various levels, with a system of organization and communication. The instructions and coordination of work based on leading individuals at the level of the General Police Directorate, police directorates and police stations are also unambiguous. Concerning communication, organization and coordination at all three levels, it takes place from the General police directorate down to the police directorates and police stations, where there is undoubtedly feedback (e.g. reporting, questions or requests for help).

**Figure 3**

*Levels of the organizational structure of the Slovenian Police*



**Source:** Ministry of the Interior, Police, n. d. c

After obtaining the consent of the Police Academy at the General Police Directorate to conduct the survey (June 2021), from July–October 2021, we conducted structured interviews at all three levels of the police organization. The sample included six police officers at the local level, seven police officers at the regional level and two police officers at the national level, all of whom deal with community policing as part of their work. The list of police officers

participating in the survey was formed at the level of the General Police Directorate or the level of individual police directorates. The structured interviews consisted of six questions and one sub-question about community policing and was primarily conducted in person or using e-tools (Zoom or Microsoft Teams). The collected answers were transcribed into written form, and qualitative data were analyzed with the ATLAS.ti tool. The six questions were:

1. What does community policing mean to you?
2. What is essential for a good organization of community policing at the level of the General police directorate, Police directorates and Police stations?
3. What is essential for good community policing coordination at the level of the General police directorate, Police directorates and Police stations?
4. What is crucial for the quality implementation of community policing at the level of the General police directorate, Police directorates and Police stations?
  - 4.1 Freedom to exercise community policing?
5. Did COVID-19 affect community policing in Slovenia? (If so, how?)

### Findings

Using the ATLAS.ti tool, we systematically analyzed the qualitative data, searched for connections between the three levels of organization of police activity, and finally interpreted the findings of the analyzed data and evaluated their importance in terms of the focus of the study. In order to ensure the anonymity of the participants, we present the results divided into three levels of organization of the Slovenian police, although in some places, things will overlap.

#### National Level

Concerning the understanding of community policing, the vast majority of police officers were unanimous that community policing is, in fact, the basis of almost all police work – including those associated with enforcement of various laws and regulations – are carried out in the community. Police officers equate community policing with the entire scope of their work, even if it is not direct cooperation with citizens in the local community or preventive cooperation that sustains future positive relations between the police and the community. However, they maintain that a crime control task (e.g. traffic control, mediation in violation of order and peace in a public or private place) results in treating and removing the offender for the benefit of each local community to ensure safety in those areas.

It is worth noting the different views about the police as an organization and the understanding of community policing as a mission in performing all police tasks in an older generation of police officers who completed a comprehensive four-year training program versus a younger generation of police officers, for whom training programs were different or shorter.

The problem pointed out by several police officers at all three levels is that in some places, the police still (erroneously) equate community policing and preventive work of the police as a specialization, and "impose" these tasks on the shoulders of a few specially designated community police officers,

As expected, the organizational structure of the police differs at the national level when compared to the regional and local level, and this carries over to an understanding and implementation of community policing. The results of the analysis indicate that at the national level (which is subject to systemic regulation by government and therefore less flexible), the operation of the police as a hierarchical organization is based on formal statements of annual goals and plans, often overlooking the fact that things can be different in practice than on paper. Sometimes it takes a lot more time and human resources to achieve an individual goal related to community policing than was anticipated in the annual plan. Also, many individual events (including security issues) at the local level occur weekly and need to be addressed. According to those interviewed, strengthening the systemic approach and undoubtedly the continuity of mutual relations and cooperation at all three levels of the police and their even closer connection and constant transfer of information in both directions can contribute to better organization and coordination of community policing.

### **Regional Level**

The very nature of the work, organization and implementation of community policing requires even greater coherence, communication and cooperation between the regional (police directorates) and local level (police stations) of the Slovenian police. The results of the analysis of the interviews showed that the communication between police directorates and police stations is regular and fluent and that information flows in both directions. At the regional and local level, police officers highlighted the importance of good communication, knowledge of community policing, ties and acquaintances between the police and the local community as essential elements for good organization and coordination of community policing activities. They also described self-initiative, enthusiasm and dedication to work, alongside trust and experience, as important to community policing. They pointed out that community policing could be of better quality if there was more freedom in decision-making, plus more financial resources for additional personnel. The accessibility and visibility of police officers at the local level have decreased over the past two years, negatively impacting community policing.

To paraphrase the words of one of the interviewed community police officers, it is imperative for community police officers to be effective at the local level, they must have a positive, confident attitude towards solving the problems that arise in the community, which leads the police officers to actively help find solutions to the various safety and security situations.

All participants in this study agreed that COVID-19 substantially impacted community policing in Slovenia, mainly negatively and very little in a positive way. There has been a narrowing of priorities and reduced tasks, accompanied by reduced contacts with the population. The decline of contacts between the police and citizens due to isolation affected a decrease in information exchange (re-establishment will require years of effort and police work), project implementation and, last but not least, the reporting of crime. Preventive activities were not actually carried out in some kindergartens and schools, and police officers pointed out that there were one or two generations of 'lost' children who did not hear certain preventive content and were deprived of contact with police officers and police work. One of the few positive things was the accelerated use of social networks (such as Facebook and Instagram) and communication technologies, including Zoom and Microsoft Teams. However, we (as researchers) must note that working remotely, via a computer screen, will never be the same as contact and live experience.

### Local Level

A significant problem related to the situation with COVID-19 in 2021 and 2022 is the lack of financial resources for prevention (which coincides with the work of the community police officers and community policing) at all three levels of the police organization. In addition to the already large amount of long-term staff attrition of the Slovenian police (especially at the regional and local level) and constant additional tasks related to COVID-19, community policing officers were delegated to patrols and had to perform various other policing tasks not related to community policing. Last but not least, the conditionality of fulfilling morbidity, vaccination, or testing ('the PC (T)<sup>3</sup>') conditions indicated that about a third of police officers do not meet the so-called PC condition, meaning that they are not convalescent of COVID-19 or vaccinated against it (the Slovenian Army is facing a similar situation), which hinders regular work at many police stations and directorates across Slovenia.

Police officers generally agree that there is always room for improvement in community policing, with significant changes also brought by new technologies that are increasingly used by the police at all levels (e.g. computer programs adapted for planning and reporting on police work, social networks, online communication tools, interactive whiteboards).

Table 1 summarizes crucial findings from the point of view of understanding and coordination of community policing at all three levels of the police organization. COVID-19 had a significant impact on community policing, as no preventive activities were carried out at the

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<sup>3</sup> In Slovenian, PCT refers to the conditions required to enter public institutions or work during the pandemic. The letter P indicates that the person has already had COVID-19, the letter C means the person has been vaccinated, and the letter T means the person has tested negative. It was necessary to meet at least one of the above conditions.

local level during the state's closure. In other words, due to lockdowns and the closure of schools and other activities, limited movement, and compliance with all measures and instructions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, police officers did not carry out any of the various community policing activities in the form of contact with people. Surveillance of compliance with measures and instructions to prevent the spread of the pandemic also worsened citizens' attitudes towards the police where the closures harmed citizens' well-being. Besides the subsequent implementation of measures that they had to adhere to, some citizens came into conflict with employees in various shops and institutions whose services they needed.

In the abovementioned cases, the police had to intervene. As a result, people became more distrustful of the police. When they saw police officers on patrol, all they cared about was whether they followed the instructions correctly. With the release of restrictive measures, the situation is now slowly improving. By the end of 2021, some preventive activities were being carried out again, in kindergartens, schools, nursing homes, and meetings with representatives of local communities. These regained activities have had a significant and positive impact on understanding the role of policing and community policing among people.

Since the beginning of the response to COVID-19 in early 2020, community policing had to be implemented in a specially planned manner, by following the recommendations of the National Institute of Public Health. Hence, during the closure of the country, the police switched to social networks for effective communication, where they published a wide range of content (including preventive content, announcements of preventive actions, tighter controls and various warnings and advice) and conducted some presentations and lectures about community policing via online communication tools (e.g. Zoom and Microsoft Teams and so on)

Thus, in Slovenia, COVID-19 harmed community policing due to less contact of the police with local stakeholders and citizens. Plus, police officers were burdened with tasks not within their primary competencies, e.g. tasks related to protecting Slovenia's EU presidency and weekly protests against COVID-19 restrictive measures. Thus, many community policing officers were assigned to regular patrols or security teams instead of their normal duties.



**Table 1**

*Differences in the understanding and coordination of community policing at the three levels of the police organization.*

	<b>General Police Directorate – National level</b>	<b>Police directorates – Regional level</b>	<b>Police stations – Local level</b>
<b>Understanding of community policing</b>	Understanding community policing and preventive activities as related areas.	Community policing coincides with the central mission of police work 'to protect and serve'.	Community policing coincides with the central mission of police work 'to protect and serve'.
<b>Essential factors for good organization, coordination and implementation of community policing</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. communication (in both directions);</li> <li>2. knowledge of community policing</li> <li>3. good connectivity between the police at all three levels;</li> <li>4. strengthening work lines between various levels of policing in Slovenia and across the police assigned to various community.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. knowledge of community policing</li> <li>2. communication and good relations at police stations and General police directorate level;</li> <li>3. contacts and good cooperation with other stakeholders in the local community;</li> <li>4. self-initiative;</li> <li>5. additional education and training;</li> <li>6. enthusiasm and dedication.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. good relations with the local community;</li> <li>2. knowledge of community policing</li> <li>3. communication and good relations at the level of police directorates;</li> <li>4. autonomy to adapt community policing programs to local community needs;</li> <li>5. self-initiative and ingenuity;</li> <li>6. understanding and support of the superior.</li> </ol>
<b>Influence of COVID-19 on community policing-related work</b>	Yes, but to a lesser extent - the method and scope of work have not changed much, yet less attention is paid to preventive activities.	Yes, to a large extent - the situation related to the pandemic, security measures, the EU presidency and the protection of protests have pushed the implementation of community policing in the local community into the background. It is still being implemented but in a very truncated form.	Yes, to a considerable extent – community police officers are assigned to patrols and other tasks, contact with the local community is lost. In some places, a whole generation of children did not have contact with the police in kindergarten/school.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In the introduction, we asked how and where to go next with community policing or how much community policing in Slovenia has ‘returned’, so we must now answer those questions. We can summarize that in the current situation in the country, the core of community policing – i.e. cooperation with the community, its leaders and its citizens – were pushed somewhat into the background due to the fulfilment of other tasks related to COVID-19 and the protection of the Slovenian presidency in the European Union. As a result, individual contacts and the exchange of information between community policing officers and the local community were significantly lost because they often had to cover other tasks and could not carry out their primary work in the community.

Consistent with the observations of Ruddell (2015), police officers in rural communities are more likely to be ‘generalists’ because they must respond to a great diversity of incidents in their area of jurisdiction, even when so many of these requests for assistance do not fall within the core of police responsibilities. In our study, police officers expressed fear of the damage caused at the expense of previously good relations with the local community. In turn, this is likely to lead to a decline in information exchange with citizens and at least a temporary weakening of cooperation between the police and members of the community.

This study confirms the findings by participants from the National Conference of Criminal Justice and Security roundtables held in June 2021. They highlighted difficulties in implementing community policing in practice due to the situation related to COVID-19, besides constant staff shortages, which are most pronounced at the regional and local levels. An even bigger problem is the difference in understanding and importance of implementing community policing at all three levels, as the national level perceives security problems much more bureaucratically due to the lack of contact with people at the local level. Forgotten is an understanding that individual tasks (or current affairs) connected to community policing can take much more time and require the ingenuity and problem-solving on the part of individual police officers. The abovementioned findings are consistent with observations of De Maillard and Terpstra (2021) who pointed out that police officers who do community policing are so-called ‘social workers’, which can put them in a marginal position within policing organizations.

Fortunately, community policing coincides with the mission of police work to ‘protect and serve’. It is generally understood as such by police officers throughout Slovenia who participated in our study. The vast majority of police officers have internalized community policing and connected or equated it with most of their tasks. A notable difference can be seen in the ranking of activities according to priorities, where at the national level, much more emphasis is placed on preventive activities, which they understand as part of community policing. At the regional and mainly local level, there is more importance given to community policing that

involves contact and cooperation with the local community to solve problems, with preventive activities as a second priority.

For the successful execution of community policing activities, Rukus et al. (2018) point out an increased presence of police officers in communities, meaning that they need to devote more time to direct communication and cooperation with the local population. Comparing Slovenia's urban and rural areas, we emphasize that the nature of rural environments provides conditions more conducive for community policing in the sense of better connections of the police with the community. However, much more of what is considered community policing was still done in the urban environment, given the larger share of the Slovenian population and the number of officers assigned to cities.

We cannot ignore the fact that the police have been exposed to various external influences, uncertainties, and organizational changes in many years since the existence of the independent state of Slovenia. Consequently, this is related to the organization of work and personnel, which undoubtedly affects the organization of policing in general and, as well, community policing. Meško (2001) noticed that public opinion and presentation of police services are influenced by the quality of performed police work, quick response to problems, possible corruption within the police, accessibility, and police visibility.

We should not neglect the pandemic and related restrictive measures and how they have impacted on public opinion about the police. This then affects the cooperation with the population and, in all probability, makes the work of the community police officer and other police officers more difficult to perform at the local level. Therefore, we can conclude that due to a combination of various factors (especially COVID-19, EU presidency, and personnel challenges), community policing was unintentionally pushed into the background, and we should not be surprised by various problems and obstacles in re-establishing police contacts with the local community. At the organizational or systemic level, it will be necessary to change the mentality and attitude of some individuals (at all three levels of the police in Slovenia) towards community policing who mistakenly believe that it is equal to only crime prevention. Fortunately, police officers at the regional and local levels are more likely to think differently and understand a broader definition of community policing as the basis of their work. In the words one who was interviewed (but, who is not a community policing officer): "police work is work for the community and in the community".

Our study shows that despite uniform educational standards and additional training, police officers at each level of community policing understand the policing somewhat differently, which is influenced by the way they work. The more police tasks are placed directly in the local community, the more community policing connects with community work. Thus, at the national level, due to the lack of direct contact with the local community, community

policing is treated much more bureaucratically and administratively, and in certain parts, it is closely linked (almost equated) with preventive activities only. This confirms De Maillard and Terpstra (2021) findings that in different settings in the field of community policing there exists shortcomings, confusion and different interpretations of philosophy, strategies, tactics, techniques and organizational perspectives of community policing.

When studying rural crime and policing in Slovenia, Eman and Bulovec (2020, p. 43) found that essential factors for successful policing, which results in a high percentage of investigated crimes, are “good, respectful interpersonal relations and cooperation with the population, committed and professional (and human) police officers, and management support”. Given the three levels of policing in Slovenia, strengthening of work lines at all three levels is imperative for effective law enforcement. Without communication, relevant knowledge, experience and knowledge of work areas related to community policing, it is possible that future events will again curtail what police do at the local levels with community leaders and citizens. Hence, there is considerable room for improvement in the coordination and implementation of community policing at all three levels, starting with a more unified understanding of community policing and respectful, two-way communication between all three levels of law enforcement in Slovenia, and assistance in the form of information, materials, human or financial resources and expert opinions in both directions. For the future, we agree with Laufs and Waseem (2020) that further research on policing and pandemics such as COVID-19 is much needed, especially the long-term impact on community policing and police-community-relations in rural and urban areas.

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