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Living and Working Conditions in the Police in 2003. A Sociological Survey

Geneviève PRUVOST is a researcher at the CESDIP, and has authored *Profession : policier. Sexe : féminin* (Paris, Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2007) and *De la sergote à la femme flic. Une autre histoire de l'institution policière. 1935-2005* (Paris, La Découverte, 2008). She has conducted a socio-demographic survey on the working conditions in the police, in collaboration with Philippe COULANGEON and Ionela ROHARICK (Paris, IHÉSI, 2003).

Why do people become police(women)? How do police(women) work? What kind of policing do they want? Qualitative investigations (including interviews, participant observation, studies of archives and of the legislation) have provided answers to these questions. But there are few statistical surveys in this field. It was to fill this gap that a study was launched in 2003 in the framework of an IHÉSI (*Institut des Hautes Études de la Sécurité Intérieure*) research program, covering 5,221 police(women) of all ranks and from every Branch (Public Security, Criminal Investigation, *Compagnie Républicaine de Sécurité* (CRS, the riot police), Border Police, *Renseignements Généraux* (RG, the intelligence agency), and the Paris Police Department).

Origins of the questionnaire: this survey was aimed at partially reproducing the 1982 « Interface survey » which was part of a reform programme of the institution¹. It also draws upon the longitudinal study conducted by Dominique Monjardet and Catherine Gorgeon between 1992 and 2002 on the 121st class of constables (*gardiens de la paix*), usually known as the « Cohort Study »². Last, a qualitative investigation conducted previously on women in the police (over a hundred interviews with men and women of all ranks³) informed the questionnaire.

Content of the questionnaire: the usual questions on the officer's social, family and occupational background are asked. These are followed by questions on the job itself, including the type of position, skills, and career, completed by questions on the officer's image of the role of the police in society. Then come a series of questions on difficulties experienced in relating to superiors, colleagues, the job itself, old-timers, and women, as well as on health. In the last part the police(women) are asked for their views on housing, food, child care and their plans for the future. This yields an overview of how these police officers relate to their work on the overall societal level as well as on the job and in relation to their family. This is what makes this survey original with respect to earlier ones, which have tended to concentrate on policing activity as such.

The sample: a probabilistic sample of 10,000 police(women) (out of a total of 140,000) was established by random selection of 87 police departments in which the entire staff was investigated. This sample was patterned after a size-based distribution of departments for each branch. In this way responses were strictly anonymous, and benefited from collective dynamics.

Administration of the questionnaire and representativeness: the questionnaire was dispatched through administrative channels. The response rate – 53% – was higher than expected for a postal questionnaire, which received no particular support from the ministry, as opposed to the 1982 survey (with a 62% response rate). As for the representativeness of the respondents, it also mirrored the proportions of the police population itself, in terms of sex, rank and type of department. *Commissaires*⁴ constitute a special case, apart from commanding and rank-and-file officers: because of their small number (n= 74) the findings on them have been mentioned for information only in the final research report, and they are excluded from the present analysis.

The point here is not to summarise all of the survey findings, because many aspects have not yet undergone analysis. We will brush a preliminary socio-demographic portrait of commanding (C.O.) and rank-and-file officers (the latter will be designated collectively as « constables »), underlining some main aspects. In pursuance of the work of D. Monjardet, we have attempted to discover the heterogeneity of the different types of personnel, but also the recurrent themes over the last twenty years, as well as recent trends.

¹ HAUSER G., MASINGUE B., 1983, *Les policiers, leurs métiers, leur formation*, Paris, La Documentation Française.

² MONJARDET D., GORGEON C., 1992, 1995, 1999, 2004, *La socialisation professionnelle des policiers. Étude longitudinale de la 121^e promotion*, Paris, IHÉSI (6 vol.).

³ PRUVOST G., 2007, *Profession : policier. Sexe : féminin*, Paris, Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.

⁴ An approximate translation would be Police Superintendants; commissaires, who occupy the top rank of the French police hierarchy, were around 2,000 in 2003 (Translator's note).



Entering the Police

At the time of this survey, the police force was divided into three corps (*commissaires*, C.O.s, constables) corresponding to the three categories – A, B, and C – of civil servants, which in the case of the police are synonymous with their social class structure (upper class, middle class, and working class) as it was in 1982. In other words, the police force is not socially homogeneous. It is worth noting that the appearance of women constables did not change this stratification: they stem from the same social groups as their male colleagues, whereas female C.O.s. are slightly better off than their male counterparts.

One remarkable trend must be mentioned: between 1982 and 2003, the educational level rose for police personnel in all categories, with diplomas exceeding the level required for the competitive entrance examination (in 2003 future constables did not need to have a *baccalauréat* (« *bac* » – the final high school degree), whereas potential C.O.s. were required to have a DEUG, the first college-level degree). The rise was greatest for constables: 63% had their « *bac* », versus 4% in

1982. Half of officers had a level equivalent to or above BAC + 2 (years of higher education), as opposed to 18% in 1982. 26% percent had a bachelor's and a master's degree. In this race for education, women stand out: as in many other occupations, they are overqualified with respect to their male counterparts. This higher educational level has been encouraged by the police institution, which has worked toward greater professionalism over the last thirty years. At the same time, this trend elicits some apprehension: will well-educated officers, especially those on the lower echelons, continue to defer to their superiors? Will they continue to do the unrewarding tasks they are assigned? At the time, the adjunction of « safety assistants » (« *adjoints de sécurité* ») (government-subsidised youth aid jobs) perpetuated the concept of an easily accessed job not requiring a degree.

Another noteworthy finding, the same for the last twenty years, is the low rate of family transmission of the profession (as opposed to teachers and doctors), among both constables and C.O.s., and again, for both men and women. Only 10% of the police force had a father or mother in the profession. If we add the

6% whose father or mother was in the army, enlistment in this « arm-carrying profession » was not a directly inherited disposition for most. The proportion has not varied significantly since 1982: 14% had a father in the police or the army at the time, versus 16% today.

Why, then, did these people enter the police, which is anything but an ordinary civil service occupation? The idea that it was by chance (a reason often mentioned in interviews, and adopted as an acceptable answer in the « Cohort Study ») was deliberately eliminated from the range of possible answers here, in order to compel respondents to specify what exactly they meant: was it a streak of luck, corresponding to a vocation, or some misfortune that led them to fall back on entering the police, for lack of anything better? On the basis of earlier evidence that people enter the police for all sorts of reasons, respondents were given a greater choice of answers than in the « Interface » and « Cohort » surveys, and above all, were granted the possibility of choosing two answers among those listed, and of ranking them.

Table. Initial motivations for joining the police (%)

| What brought you to join the police | FIRST CHOICE | | | | | | SECOND CHOICE | | | | | |
|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------|------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|---------------------|------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| | Commanding Officers | | | Constables | | | Commanding Officers | | | Constables | | |
| | M | F | Total | M | F | Total | M | F | Total | M | F | Total |
| The wages | 5.1 | 1.3 | 4.6 | 12.1 | 5.7 | 11.2 | 2.3 | 2.7 | 2.3 | 4.7 | 3.4 | 4.5 |
| Job security | 13.3 | 6.7 | 12.4 | 31.7 | 26.2 | 30.9 | 8.0 | 5.3 | 7.6 | 17.2 | 17.9 | 17.3 |
| = The « realists » | 18.4 | 8.0 | 17.1 | 43.8 | 31.9 | 42.1 | 10.3 | 8.0 | 9.9 | 21.9 | 21.3 | 21.8 |
| Doing an outstanding job | 18.9 | 16.0 | 18.5 | 7.5 | 7.5 | 7.5 | 11.3 | 10.7 | 11.2 | 6.2 | 7.9 | 6.4 |
| Detective story novels/ TV series/films | 1.0 | 1.3 | 1.1 | 0.3 | 0.4 | 0.3 | 6.2 | 2.7 | 5.7 | 1.4 | 1.5 | 2.7 |
| Doing a job where you're on the | 27.1 | 30.7 | 27.5 | 20.2 | 24.6 | 20.8 | 9.6 | 8.0 | 9.4 | 10.5 | 11.7 | 10.6 |
| = The « adventurous » | 46.9 | 48.0 | 47.1 | 28.0 | 32.4 | 28.6 | 23.6 | 24.4 | 22.2 | 18.1 | 21.1 | 19.7 |
| Being in contact with people | 9.4 | 12.0 | 9.8 | 7.7 | 10.6 | 8.1 | 8.2 | 14.7 | 9.1 | 9.6 | 11.8 | 9.9 |
| Doing something useful | 12.1 | 21.3 | 13.3 | 10.7 | 10.0 | 10.6 | 18.9 | 18.7 | 18.8 | 14.9 | 14.2 | 14.8 |
| = The « missionaries » | 21.5 | 33.3 | 23.1 | 18.4 | 20.6 | 18.8 | 27.1 | 33.4 | 27.9 | 24.5 | 26 | 24.7 |
| To be in command | 2.5 | - | 2.1 | 0.2 | 0.5 | 0.2 | 2.9 | 2.7 | 2.8 | 0.6 | 0.7 | 0.6 |
| Because you're respected | - | - | - | 0.1 | 0.5 | 0.2 | 0.2 | - | 0.2 | 0.3 | - | 0.3 |
| To enforce law and order | 8.8 | 10.7 | 9.1 | 8.7 | 12.9 | 9.3 | 11.1 | 22.7 | 12.6 | 14.8 | 15.8 | 14.9 |
| = The « rigorists » | 11.3 | 10.7 | 11.2 | 9.0 | 14.0 | 9.7 | 14.2 | 25.4 | 15.6 | 15.7 | 16.5 | 15.8 |
| No answer | 1.8 | - | 1.6 | 0.8 | 1.1 | 0.8 | 21.5 | 12.0 | 20.3 | 19.7 | 15.2 | 18.0 |
| Ensemble | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| N | 593 | 93 | 686 | 3 844 | 617 | 4 461 | 593 | 93 | 686 | 3 844 | 617 | 4 461 |

The answers fall into four categories which may be put under two headings: vocation, in the broadest sense of the term, which is more frequent than realism – job security⁵ and attractive wages – and always has been since 1982. Officers of all ranks, women and men, proclaim their vocation, although women and C.O.s. more so than men and constables. Notwithstanding, we note that realistic reasons are mentioned by 42% of constables, who are well aware that this is the best paid C-category civil

service job available, given the educational level required.

People who joined the police because of a vocation are divided into three categories: the « adventurous » (47% of C.O.s. and 29% of constables), « missionaries » (23% of C.O.s. and 19% of constables), and « rigorists » (11% of C.O.s. and 10% of constables). Note that irrespective of initial motivation, the proportion of those with fathers in the police or the army was the same for all groups.

The « realists » were mostly constables and men. They were also more often of working class origin, with housewife mothers. This is also the least educated category, with more technical and commercial studies. These family and educational factors may elicit a desire to enter the police for a change of occupation and a chance for rapid upward social mobility. A third fact: the « realists » were older than the other categories. As shown previously in the 1992 « Cohort » study of constables attending police academy, the theme of job security and wa-

⁵ In France, police(women) are civil servants.

ges has declined in comparison with 1982. The younger generation is more inclined to think in terms of vocation.

The « adventurous », in search of action, are the symmetrical opposite of the « realists ». They are younger, better educated and tend more to come from executive-level families and the intellectual professions. They include more former students who had never held a job. This is the main motivation advanced by officers of both sexes. Women who joined the police because they liked adventure share these characteristics with their male counterparts, but more accentuated.

The « missionaries » who entered the police to be useful to and in contact with people stand out in that they are older. Perhaps the time passed has affected their memory of their initial motivations. It is a fact that as they advance in their career, the police tend to distance themselves from the « cow-boy » image. The gender dimension of the phenomenon is quite complex. If we look at the detail for each rank, we note that 33% of women C.O.s and 21% of women constables showed a missionary vocation as their first choice, versus 21% and 18% for their male counterparts. But if we look at the « hard-line » missionaries, those who only chose one motivation, or two in the same category, the vocation was stronger in men (42%) as opposed to women (32%). In short, women claim to have entered the police by vocation more often than men, but that sole vocation was much less strongly asserted.

The « rigorists » are the smallest group (one respondent out of ten), with the fewest « hard-liners ». Most are legalists, meaning that they primarily want to enforce law and order (for 9% as first choice). Only 0.6% of all respondents chose *being in command* and the desire *to be respected*. It is noteworthy that the proportion of women selecting this item is larger than that of men, and that these women were younger, chose their calling at an earlier age, and were less educated than women in the other categories.

While the profession is mostly embraced out of vocation, the word covers a variety of meanings. Attraction for civil service work or economic necessity are declining as motivations, indicating that the profession is attractive in itself.

Conception of the Profession and Life Style

Once people enter the police, do they hold on to the same relationship to the profession? Obviously, the division into two police corps (C.O.s./constables) produces distinct positions within the institution. The two have drawn closer, however, thanks to internal *concours* (competitive examinations for advancement), thanks also to the fact that some

C.O.s. wear uniforms to work whereas some constables may dress in plain clothes, and that the latter may become *police judiciaire* officers (criminal investigation police). Rather than emphasising the heterogeneity of the profession, already evidenced by D. Monjardet, we shall concentrate on representations denoting a relative consensus (first and/or second choice) within the profession, so as to determine the outlines of the « professional doxa », its stability since 1982 and trends therein.

In our questionnaire, most respondents (71%) agreed that they had learned most of their trade in the field rather than during training, thus corroborating D. Monjardet's analysis on the primacy of experience over training⁶. 41% of C.O.s and 44% of constables liked their profession because they encountered a variety of situations. What they disliked most, irrespective of rank or sex, was a lack of efficiency (40% of C.O.s. and 31% of constables). Honesty ranked first among desirable qualities for police(women) at all ranks.

For both sexes, the police(woman)'s main task is to enforce the law (56%). As in 1982, they wanted more collaboration with judges and the gendarmes, and believed that parental and court leniency is the main cause of crime, and that greater surveillance of drug dealers is needed (46%). Among the proposed items, this is the most frequently mentioned target group for all categories within the police. Last, asked about what subject was mainly missing in their police academy curriculum, they agree on their lack of training in human relations and psychology. This was given first choice by people of all ranks (49% for C.O.s. and 33% for constables).

In addition to the fact that these views are shared by all police corps and by both sexes, some have remained extremely stable for the last twenty years. However, two changes appear in comparison with 1982: openness and contact are valued less than before. Only 12% of constables and C.O.s. claim to like their profession because it offers a lot of contact with the public. This was true of three times as many officers in 1982: 31% of constables and 39% of C.O.s had opted for that answer (which ranked second among preferences). These findings are corroborated by a second question testing ability to relate: in 1982, 12% of constables, 15% of C.O.s felt that the first quality of a police(woman) was to be open to other people. In 2003 only 8% of constables and 11% of C.O.s. were of that opinion. The other trend has to do with the increasing complaints about nervous wear and tear. In 1982, 9% of constables, and 14% of C.O.s

complained of that aspect of the job. In 2003 the figures had more than doubled, since this negative dimension is now mentioned by 23% of the police(women) (representing 22% of constables and 33% of C.O.s.) in our sample.

The difficulty in reconciling their profession with their personal life, often mentioned in interviews, may partially account for this difference, although the questionnaire survey points up some findings that contradict the clichés circulating within the profession. Irrespective of rank, police officers actually state that there are many divorces in the police force, and blame the job (and sometimes the presence of women) for disturbing marital life. Now, our survey clearly shows a similar percentage of divorces and separations (6%) among constables and C.O.s., with no significant variation since 1982 (5%).

To obtain further information on the family situation of respondents, one question provided a chronological list of the various marital situations experienced. Here too, the difference between constables and C.O.s. was not significant, and 80% of respondents claimed to have a stable marital situation. Family life even seems to have improved slightly, at least for constables: in 1982, 21% complained of a lack of time for their family as opposed to 16% in 2003. Only 9% of officers voiced a similar complaint (like C.O.s in 1982).

Rotating assignments: playing musical chairs

The requisites for satisfaction with the profession of police(woman) cannot be discussed here, any more than the variety of their ideological positions. One unusual organisational feature may, however, be evidenced, that is, horizontal mobility (independent of internal promotion). Forty percent of C.O.s. and 25% of constables had experienced a change of branch within the police in the course of their career, and over half of C.O.s. and 40% of constables had occupied more than three positions (at least 7 for 15% of C.O.s. and 10% of constables). Women are less affected by this mobility, but do not reverse the tendency to « move around » (*la bougeotte* in police terminology).

This mobility complicates skill-management. For this reason respondents were given a closed-ended list from which to choose the three roles in which they felt most competent and the three roles they presently play most frequently.

Respondents « exactly where they should be » (exact correspondence between tasks and skills, irrespective of the order of their three choices) are the largest group, 34% of the entire sample, with those « in the right place » – 30% of the sample – on their heels (two current

⁶ MONJARDET D., 1987, *Compétence, qualification et l'analyse de l'action policière, Sociologie du Travail*, 1, 47-58.

tasks corresponding to two of the three skills mentioned). The « underemployed » (one current task corresponding to one of the three skills mentioned) represent 26% of the group, whereas the « very inappropriately employed » (no correspondence between tasks and skills) were the smallest group (10%).

One of the most significant elements with respect to employment has to do with the initial corps to which the person belonged: there are more C.Os. (19%) among those « exactly where they should be » than in the sample as a whole. Work schedules were a second discriminating factor: those « exactly where they should be » worked office hours more often than the other categories (51%), as opposed to 35% of those « very inappropriately employed », who mostly worked unconventional hours or at night.

Contrary to what might be expected, respondents who felt they were appropriately or inappropriately employed did not belong to different age groups. Indeed, one might think that young police(wo)men, often assigned to positions they did not choose, would claim to be « poorly employed » more often than their elders. Nor is sex a discriminating variable: the « well-employed », « underemployed », and « ill-employed » categories all contain between 14% and 16% of women, not significantly different from the proportion of women in our sample (14%). Nor can we see a hierarchy between the different police branches: Public Security is no more over- or under-represented than the Criminal Investigation. Last, the phenomenon affects both the Paris area and the provinces.

We may advance a putative interpretation of the fact that neither age, sex, type of branch or location are discriminating variables as to the good or bad use to which the skills of police personnel are put. The following elements must be remembered: the police constitute a very mobile civil service corps, in all respects. Most of the personnel, coming from the provinces, would like to return to their region of origin. In addition to this first, personal motivation there is a second, organisational one: to rise in the hierarchy or transfer to another corps (through internal promotion), police(wo)men are obliged to change departments, and sometimes even regions. This first type of professional mobility should not overshadow the mobility of personnel within a given department. For instance, a constable who has just arrived in the department may be assigned to the emergency squad, then, with a little seniority he may apply for the Crime Squad, after which, if he no longer wants to work at night and prefers to work office hours, he may ask for a move to registering complaints. This inter-

nal mobility depends on cooptation and requires negotiation with one's superiors. When transferred to another region or another branch, he must start all over again and will have to negotiate his mobility within the department, in accordance with his experience and seniority in that place.

This summary of the rules presiding over professional mobility in the police shows that police careers are composed of alternating stints in elected positions (through changes of location but also through negotiations with the hierarchy within each department) and imposed positions (because of recent arrival in the department or employment as a stopgap in a personnel shortage, or for disciplinary reasons). Imposed assignments apparently cannot be eliminated: there is always a residue of very inappropriately employed workers. Diachronically, however, this one-third of « ill-employed » police(wo)men does not constitute a motionless group. Were that the case, a statistically more distinct socio-professional image of this group would emerge. Given the present state of organisation of the police, this incompressible third looks more like a « flying » reserve group playing musical chairs.

As soon as a more adequate assignment is open, someone turns out to be the right person for it in the department, and someone else, floating around, takes his place. The larger the department and the more rapid the turnover, the better this works. Aside from cases in which the officer never finds the right place (because of a lack of vocation and disillusionment with the profession), police(wo)men necessarily derive some profit from this turnover, since everyone, at one point or another, finds a « chair » on which to sit or to rebound. The difference between officers does not lie in the objective fact of finding an adequate position, but in the amount of time spent in finding it. Because the channels are more or less congested, and some require more patience or connections than others. None of the survey questions yield information on this point, precisely. There are reasons to suppose that, distinctions may be made within the famous group of « people with connections », those "co-opted" who spend relatively little time in the limbo of the most ordinary policing jobs and go on to the more prestigious, specialized jobs. When interviewed, women tend more to mention the hurdles they had to overcome to get one position or another, and to prove, precisely, that they were competent.

Job rotation is in any case a key point in human resource management in the police. Professional dissatisfaction, on the one hand, and the difficulties in re-

conciling professional and family life on the other hand, are attenuated by the flexibility and ease with which one can change jobs within the profession – what the police like to call « a profession with a thousand trades ».

The policing profession is anything but monolithic. This has been evidenced by the sociology of the police in France since the « Cohort » survey. The present survey follows the same tradition, while refining the analysis of the diversity of reasons mentioned for joining the police, and evidences the importance of horizontal mobility in the management of policing careers. However, despite the diversity of police personnel and jobs thus evidenced, sight should not be lost of all the clichés and leitmotifs which support the feeling of shared belonging, however plural and segmented the organisation into corps, ranks, departments and positions, and in spite of the arrival of women. One question remains: what about 2009? Given the persistence of some findings between 1982 and 2003, it may be hypothesised that some hold still true for the present period, but this requires further validation. Police is a public service which has undergone many transformations, the effects of which would have to be measured by the administration of another similar questionnaire.

Geneviève PRUVOST
(gpruvost@free.fr)