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The Decentralized Structure, Professional Development, and Public Perception of the Swiss Police[1]

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Abstract

Aim: The aim of this study is to present the organizational structure of the Swiss police, its training system, and the modern technological solutions supporting police work. The paper also briefly examines public perceptions of the police and the level of public trust in law enforcement in Switzerland.
Methodology: The study is based on the analysis of international academic literature, official law enforcement documents, and publicly available professional sources. The findings are complemented by the author's personal observations gained during several years of residence in Switzerland, which serve to illustrate the functioning of the Swiss police and its perception within society.
Findings: The Swiss police system is characterized by a decentralized cantonal structure combined with uniform professional standards. Police training is highly practice-oriented and places particular emphasis on communication, mediation, and conflict-management skills. Law enforcement activities are supported by advanced digital, forensic, and information technologies. The study also highlights the high level of public trust enjoyed by the Swiss police.
Value: The paper provides a comprehensive overview of the Swiss police system and contributes to the Hungarian literature on comparative policing and

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law enforcement studies by presenting organizational, educational, and technological aspects of Swiss policing.

Keywords: Swiss police, police training, policing, law enforcement technology, cantonal police.

Introduction

Examining the organization, operations, and training systems of law enforcement agencies not only contributes to understanding a given country's public security situation, but also provides an opportunity to compare different policing models. Gaining international insight is particularly essential for police science, as the divergent historical, social, and administrative traditions of individual countries have yielded distinct approaches to fulfilling police responsibilities.

In the public consciousness, Switzerland is widely regarded as one of Europe's safest countries, whose law enforcement framework warrants attention from multiple angles. Its decentralized operation stemming from a federal state structure, its high-standard and practice-oriented police training, and its extensive application of modern technological solutions represent characteristics that are noteworthy even in international comparison. Furthermore, the level of social trust in the Swiss police is outstanding, providing vital feedback on the efficacy of law enforcement agencies.

Interest in this subject was fostered by the author's multi-year stay in Switzerland, during which personal observations were gathered across various cantons regarding the everyday operations and public perception of the police. Based on these personal impressions, the polite and respectful communication displayed toward citizens is particularly remarkable, and it is equally perceptible during enforcement interventions and routine interactions.

Organizational Structure of the Swiss Police

The Swiss federal system is also mirrored in the decentralization of police activities. As noted in the introduction, the "Swiss police" as a single monolithic entity does not exist in practice, since each of the 26 cantons maintains its own cantonal police force (*Kantonspolizei*). At federal level, fedpol (*Bundesamt für Polizei*) coordinates national and international police cooperation and investigates serious crimes within federal jurisdiction (URL1). Within its supervisory

remit, FINMA monitors financial institutions' compliance with anti-money-laundering due diligence and reporting requirements (URL2).

Swiss police training is likewise decentralized (URL3), it does not take place in a single institution, but rather across cantonal or regional police academies and police schools. Admission requirements are multi-staged and rigorous, with an average of 80% of applicants per canton failing to meet entry criteria (URL4).

In police schools, candidates acquire the most essential foundational and practical knowledge during their first year in an intensive residential training format, covering physical training, firearms handling, and operational tactical knowledge and skills. At the end of the first year, candidates take a qualification examination (*Einsatzfähigkeit*).

During the second year, they complete internships in live field situations, typically supported by mentors. At the conclusion of their training, they earn the title of "Federal Certified Police Officer" (*Polizist/in mit eidgenössischem Fachausweis*). The duration of training is two years, after which graduates may serve as patrol officers or border guards.

Detectives typically begin their careers as patrol officers, advancing through further studies into investigators and later into commanders. They can participate in specialized investigative courses, primarily in fields such as crimes against life, money laundering and other financial crimes, economic crime, cybercrime, and counterterrorism. Individuals may also become detectives without completing a police academy or university degree (URL5).

Police academies offer higher-level education, equipping police students with legal knowledge, criminology, criminalistics, leadership theory, psychology, and other subjects and practical skills indispensable for criminal investigation work (URL6).

Graduates of university programs may also—naturally—join the police force. Key institutions in criminological education include the University of Lausanne (URL7), as well as ETH Zurich (URL8), where high-level instruction in cybersecurity, information security, and digital forensics is conducted.

The Swiss law enforcement training system can be characterized as a distinctive blend of uniform professional standards and decentralized cantonal operations. It is defined by a high degree of practice-orientation, competency-based education, and adaptation to a multilingual social and institutional environment, which may necessitate proficiency in German, French, Italian, and in certain regions, Romansh. High priority is assigned to mastering mediation skills and techniques.

According to the author's personal observations, the operation of the Swiss police is characterized by courteous and respectful communication toward citizens, whether involving an enforcement intervention or general assistance. A component of this modern educational approach is the *Video-Retex* method: during situational drills, candidates wear body cameras, and the resulting footage is subsequently analyzed with instructors, mentors, and psychologists. Emphasis is placed on lawful conduct, proportionality of action, politeness, tone of voice, and other behavioral indicators. The systematic debriefing of these recordings contributes significantly to training outcomes (URL9).

Technological Innovations and Specialized Police Equipment in the Swiss Police

Swiss investigators and police agencies utilize cutting-edge technological solutions in their work. Digital forensic tools, crime scene recording systems, and modern communications technologies contribute significantly to the efficiency of investigations and the maintenance of public security.

During investigations, Swiss detectives deploy state-of-the-art instruments. Of particular note are the 3D laser scanners used during crime scene processing (e.g., Faro Focus, Orbis devices). The scanner captures millions of spatial data points within minutes, preserving the scene for subsequent procedural actions. The advantage of this method is that scene closure times can be significantly shortened, thereby mitigating restrictions imposed on the public and traffic flow. The generated 3D survey enables prosecutors and courts to examine and walk through the scene via monitor displays or virtual reality (VR) headsets.

The Swiss-developed PIX4D software from Lausanne can generate detailed 3D models of a scene and its surrounding environment from drone imagery (URL10). At the Institute of Forensic Medicine at the University of Zurich, *Virtopsy* combines CT, MRI and optical 3D imaging to document forensic findings and support their reconstruction (URL11).

In DNA identification, rapid genetic testing procedures (*Rapid DNA*) are gaining prominence, enabling the generation of a DNA profile in a short timeframe. In the fight against cybercrime, Swiss authorities utilize advanced digital forensic tools and software for analyzing, recovering, and preserving electronic data as evidence.

Although Switzerland is not a member of the European Union, its automated fingerprint and facial recognition systems are integrated with Schengen databases.

Communication among Swiss law enforcement agencies is supported by the nationwide POLYCOM (URL12) digital radio network, which provides secure, interoperable communication for the police, emergency medical services, fire brigades, customs and border control authorities, and civil protection. Field officers are assisted by mobile data communication devices—smartphones and tablets—that facilitate on-scene checks of persons, vehicles, and identity documents, as well as rapid access to relevant police databases.

Fotokite (URL13) tethered drones are deployed in Switzerland for monitoring street-level crime and documenting traffic accidents. Helicopters equipped with FLIR (URL14) thermal imaging cameras assist in detecting individuals hiding in dense forests or mountainous terrain.

Laser speed enforcement systems and automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) systems support traffic policing. Roadblocks can be secured using spiked barrier strips (Stinger Spike System). Dräger digital analyzers enable roadside testing for blood alcohol concentration and narcotics.

Swiss police officers typically carry Glock or SIG Sauer pistols as their standard-issue sidearm. Long firearms do not generally form part of standard patrol gear; however, they are available in patrol vehicles for executing higher-risk interventions. At airports and during specialized policing operations, the deployment of long firearms is more frequent. Specialized tactical units in certain cantons (e.g., *Enzian*, *Skorpion*) are equipped with further specialized armaments.

Personal protective equipment for Swiss officers includes modern ballistic vests designed to provide protection against firearms as well as edged and stabbing weapons in accordance with service requirements. Police units may also deploy shotguns during special operations, which can be utilized for technical purposes such as breaching doors. For higher-risk enforcement actions and special tactical operations, designated units maintain carbines and other specialized weaponry and equipment.

In several cantons, Swiss police forces utilize conducted energy devices (*Taser*), which constitute an integral part of the continuum of coercive measures. Police equipment also includes batons, including expandable telescopic variants (URL15). Special police tactical units—operating under diverse designations and organizational forms depending on the canton—receive specialized tactical training and possess equipment that exceeds that of regular patrol units.

Public Trust and Perception of the Swiss Police

When evaluating modern law enforcement systems, it is insufficient to examine solely organizational structures, training curricula, or technical infrastructure. Public acceptance of the police and the degree of citizen trust carry equal weight. A fundamental prerequisite for the legitimate functioning of law enforcement agencies is that their actions are perceived by society as lawful, professional, and proportionate.

The public perception of the Swiss police is remarkable in this regard. According to available surveys, trust in the police is exceptionally high in international comparison, which can be attributed to the professional conduct of police forces, high-standard training, and a long tradition of community cooperation.

The Swiss police enjoy broad public support, corroborated by empirical survey findings. A 2022 survey indicated that 90% of the population trusts the Swiss police and evaluates their activities very positively (URL16). This trust is also reflected in the fact that 88.9% of respondents (virtually matching the proportion expressing trust) reported that they did not fear becoming a victim of crime during the 12 months preceding the survey. The general public highly values the objective, professional, and courteous conduct of the police.

In a brief comparison with the crime situation in Hungary, respondents to the 2022 survey expressed greatest concern regarding fraud and attempted fraud (investment fraud, retail scams, and romance scams). This was followed by cybercrimes (e.g., unauthorized network intrusions, data theft), sexual harassment, threats, and bicycle theft.

The available data demonstrate that the Swiss police enjoy widespread societal support, which represents one of the defining hallmarks of the Swiss policing model. Survey results consistently confirm that the Swiss police command high public recognition.

Summary

An examination of the Swiss police system illustrates that a decentralized law enforcement model grounded in a federal state structure is entirely reconcilable with uniform professional standards. Alongside the broad autonomy of cantonal police forces, federal-level coordination ensures an effective response against serious and cross-border offenses.

Further defining features of the Swiss policing system include practice-oriented basic police training, continuous professional development, and the comprehensive implementation of modern technological solutions. Criminal-

istic and IT innovations, digital investigation tools, contemporary communication networks, and sophisticated scene-investigation technologies contribute significantly to the effectiveness of police operations and the maintenance of public security.

The high degree of social acceptance and public trust enjoyed by the Swiss police is closely tied to professional performance, rigorous training, and a well-established culture of cooperation between officers and citizens. A primary takeaway of the Swiss law enforcement model is that effective policing is not solely a matter of organizational hierarchy or technical apparatus; rather, it is fundamentally shaped by police mentality, the quality of communication, a courteous, professional, and lawful culture of intervention, and genuine respect displayed toward citizens.

Drawing upon the Swiss experience, Hungarian policing could derive valuable insights regarding the further development of communication and conflict-management competencies, the deepening of community partnerships, and the wider integration of modern law enforcement and forensic technologies. Together, these advancements can foster greater social acceptance of the police, bolster public safety, and further solidify public confidence in law enforcement authorities.

Online links in the article

URL1: *Practical information*. https://www.fedpol.admin.ch/en/practical-information

URL2: *Combating money laundering in the context of financial market supervision*. https://www.finma.ch/en/supervision/cross-sector-issues/combating-money-laundering/

URL3: *Nationale Bildungsplattform Polizei – NBPP*. https://www.edupolice.ch/de/

URL4: *Die Schlafqualität leidet: Personalmangel bremst Schweizer Polizei – Korps reagieren*. https://www.blick.ch/politik/die-schlafqualitaet-leidet-personalmangel-bremst-schweizer-polizei-korps-reagieren-id21380174.html

URL5: *Berufsbild und Karriereperspektiven*. https://www.police.be.ch/de/start/karriere/polizei/bestpol/berufsbild-und-karriereperspektiven.html

URL6: *Einsatztraining Polizei: Einsatzfähigkeit an erster Stelle*. https://www.kompol-zh.ch/spezialisierungen/einsatztraining-polizei

URL7: *University of Lausanne (UNIL)*. https://www.unil.ch/unil/en/home.html

URL8: *ETH Zurich – Homepage*. https://ethz.ch/en.html

URL9: *Polizeiausbildung in der Schweiz: Vorbereitung auf Extremsituationen*. https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/politik/so-lernt-der-nachwuchs-der-polizei-den-umgang-mit-extremsituationen/48416486?nab=0

URL10: *About Pix4D, the leading photogrammetry software company*. https://www.pix4d.com/about-us/

URL11: *Forensic Imaging | Virtopsy®*. https://www.irm.uzh.ch/en/forschung/bildgebungvirtopsy.html
URL12: *Management and operational communications systems*. https://www.babs.admin.ch/en/management-and-operational-communications-systems
URL13: *Actively Tethered Drones for Emergency Response*. https://fotokite.com/
URL14: *Search & Rescue*. https://www.flir.com/ots/search-rescue/
URL15: *Polizeibedarf kaufen – Dienst- und Einsatzmaterial*. https://www.trooper.ch/collections/dienst-einsatzmaterial
URL16: *Crime Survey 2022: Hohes Vertrauen in die Polizei – Erstmals Zahlen zu Hate Crime*. https://www.kkpks.ch/de/meldungen/crime-survey-2022-hohes-vertrauen-in-die-polizei-%E2%80%93-erstmals-zahlen-zu-hate-crime-292

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Ethics statement

The author declares that the study was conducted in accordance with the applicable research ethics and publication ethics requirements.

Data availability

The research data supporting the findings presented in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to applicable data protection and other legal restrictions.

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