Public perception of police behaviors in the disaster COVID-19 – The case of Serbia

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of the study is to determine the perception of general public on the Serbian police behaviors in combating COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the perception of the citizens how successful the police units were in fulfilling their tasks.

Design/methodology/approach – Due to the state of emergency declared due to COVID-19 pandemic, in particular the restriction of movement and the need for social distance, the data collection for this study had to be conducted via the online survey platform (Google.doc). The study was conducted during March–April 2020, only four weeks after the state of emergency was declared. The participants were invited to complete the online questionnaire in their native language by using the snowball sampling strategy focused on recruiting the general public via social media tools.

Findings – Considering the fact that police officers are not sufficiently prepared and trained to respond in these specific circumstances, it is necessary to improve their engagement in the future by conducting appropriate training, procuring adequate resources, implementing adequate planning activities, etc. The results of the multivariate regressions of public perception preparedness subscale show that the most important predictor is gender and it explains 23.6% of the variance in preparedness subscale. The remaining variables did not have significant effects on preparedness. This model with all mentioned independent variables explains 6.1% of the variance of preparedness subscale.

Originality/value – Bearing in mind that there were no completed studies on public perception of police behaviors about the COVID-19 disaster in Serbia, the research has a considerable scientific and social importance.

Keywords Police, Disaster, Public perception, COVID-19, Serbia

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Most people in the world believe that terrorism is the greatest threat of modern times, without knowing the fact that diseases are the cause in 91% of deaths in the world (Rokvić *et al.*, 2016). Epidemics are increasingly endangering the safety and health of humans and are therefore increasingly catching the attention of researchers (Cvetković *et al.*, 2018). The global COVID-19 pandemic, together with an immense number of cases and deaths, has also changed the way of life.

Unfortunately, it did not skip the Republic of Serbia, a country with about 7,000,000 citizens and has numerous citizens immigrating for economics. The very last fact contributed to the spread of the virus to Serbia. The first case was registered in Serbia on March 6, 2020, and like most of the following, it appeared because infected Serbian citizens returned to their homeland in large numbers from countries that were already the seat of the pandemic. Estimating that the level of risk of the coronavirus is extremely high, on March 15, the state

leadership opted for a declaration of the state of emergency, which allows the use of a wider range and intensity of emergency measures in stopping the pandemic (Cvetković *et al.*, 2020).

Emergencies, such as COVID-19, make the police confront dangerous situations that may frighten or threaten large numbers of citizens, but this does not change the social role of the police – the government and citizens still expect the police to maintain public order (Milojković *et al.*, 2015). While police officers spend more time thinking about the rise of violent crime, pandemic emergencies may not be high on their planning list (Luna *et al.*, 2007). Just as critical incidents caused by human actions or natural disasters, the pandemic affects the work of the police in various ways (Brito *et al.*, 2009).

The police in Serbia are an organizational part of the Ministry of Interior structured according to the so-called centralized system with the basic task to protect people's lives, their rights, freedom and property (Milojević and Janković, 2017). Prior to COVID-19, the police had no experience with this form of emergency but was only engaged in natural disasters, primarily floods. The catastrophic floods that hit Serbia during May 2014 forced the police to change their usual way of work (Milojković *et al.*, 2015). In addition to performing regular police tasks, a large number of police officers were engaged in repairing the damage, providing assistance to victims, rescue and search operations and as assessed by some authors (Bonkiewicz and Ruback, 2012) on one of the main police tasks during emergencies – the evacuation of citizens (Cvetković, 2016). The new task of the police during the pandemic was to ensure compliance with the application of measures: (1) restrictions and bans on movement, (2) ban on gatherings, (3) health surveillance and quarantine and (4) issuing movement permits when otherwise prohibited (Đorđević, 2020).

At the beginning of the pandemic in Serbia, the first measure taken was the complete closure of border crossings to surrounding countries, as done by most European countries (Turanjanin and Radulović, 2020). Similar measures were introduced by Australia and New Zealand, countries that closed after establishing strict border controls, as well as on the border between Canada and the United States (Sheptycki, 2020). Serbian citizens arriving from countries affected by the pandemic were issued a 28-day self-isolation measure, based on the sanitary inspector's decision delivered at the border crossing (Cvetković *et al.*, 2020). In the first day of the pandemic, the greatest pressure was placed on the border police, since their task was to determine which country the citizens came from because it was impossible to determine from the travel documents. In some passports, there were no seals to confirm crossing certain borders, or these seals were placed one over the other and not clearly visible. A number of citizens gave false information in order to avoid self-isolation measures (Pink, 2020). Due to the large influx of Serbian citizens at the border crossings, of nearly 400,000 during the first month, there was no time for classic checks (Đorđević, 2020). Each member of the border police conducted passenger profiling individually, on an *ad hoc* basis, based on his/her previous experience, interviews and vehicle and baggage checks (Pink, 2020).

Citizens who were issued the decision on self-isolation or the epidemiologist decision because of the suspicion of COVID-19 or suspicion they had contact with a sick person were required to stay in their homes for 14 or 28 days (Đorđević, 2020). Police would check whether citizens were in their homes in several ways. The police first called the citizens' home phone numbers several times a day (Đorđević, 2020). This involved a huge amount of work, because at certain times there were between 70,000 and 100,000 citizens in self-isolation (Pink, 2020). Due to the lack of police personnel who would perform telephone checks, the work was reorganized, so the employees doing the police administrative jobs started to perform telephone checks. If citizens did not answer phone calls, the police patrols arrived at their home address to determine if the called person was located at the residence address (Đorđević, 2020). Checks were carried out in such a way that they were conducted at different time intervals, so that persons did not know the exact time of the control (Đorđević, 2020). The third way of control, especially for Serbian citizens who came from abroad, was to monitor

their movements based on foreign mobile phone numbers (without wiretapping). If the citizens were not found, a search was made for them, and after finding them, a criminal complaint was filed for the criminal offense of *Failure to comply with health regulations during the epidemic* (Turanjanin and Radulović, 2020).

Another measure was the restriction and prohibition of the movement of persons (Đorđević, 2020), the control of which was the responsibility of the police. The first type of permanent restriction on movement was for senior citizens aged 65 and over. The second restriction of movement – the curfew was valid for all citizens, regardless of age, every day from 5 p.m., until 5 a.m. the following morning. According to the police of Serbia (Pink, 2020), 4%–5% of Serbian citizens violated the prohibition of movement during curfew or 25 of every 100,000 citizens did not comply with this measure.

The police officers also performed other tasks to counteract the pandemic, and above all, it was to search for the contacts of infected persons, to keep such persons in self-isolation. Special telephone numbers and e-mail addresses were opened for obtaining information, suppression of illegal sale of medical equipment and consumer goods, the police regulated queues in front of shops, prohibited gatherings of larger number persons, etc.

Given that members of the police are at the forefront of implementing measures aimed at countering COVID-19, they are therefore at greater risk of exposure and infection (Jennings and Perez, 2020). During the course of their work, for the first month of the pandemic, in Serbia, 17 police officers were found to have COVID-19, and about 800 were self-isolated due to virus symptoms or suspected contact with infected persons, representing 2.34% of all police officers (Pink, 2020). During the first weeks of the pandemic in New York, about 1,500 police officers (4% of the total) were infected, and one in six police officers was ill or in quarantine (Ashby, 2020). As there was a danger of spreading the disease among police officers, 10% of them were sent on forced leave (Pink, 2020). This was done in order to preserve a number of police officers as a reserve in case there were more infected among the police.

Literature review
The conceptual role of the police in pre- and post-disaster planning has been largely neglected in the literature (Varano and Schafer, 2012; Cvetković, 2014). An ineffective response during a natural disaster can prevent police officers from evacuating, interfere with search and rescue, but greatly reduce public confidence in the police (Deflem and Sutphin, 2009). A study conducted by Varano and Schafer (2012) indicated that in the future the police organizations and their leaders should have additional education on planning and responding to critical events. They should move away from the traditional police mentality that wants to define every possible incident in detail, because the nature of critical incidents often defies clear prediction, which is why staff should be given a clear operational framework, but with full discretion and flexibility to make plans.

The importance of emergency management in the police was emphasized in the study (Sommer *et al.*, 2017) that referred to a terrorist act carried out in Norway, at a youth camp on Utøya Island, in 2011. The response and management of the new situation was not adequate, due to inadequate command in the police during the crisis. The study came to similar results as in the research by Varano and Schafer (2012) in the part related to police learning activities, because they are mainly focused on everyday police work and common emergencies, and do not prepare police officers to manage new crisis situations.

The importance of emergency planning was demonstrated in a study conducted by Rojek and Smith (2007), which examined the behavior, attitudes and perceptions of police officers about their activities during the 2005 Louisiana and Mississippi hurricanes. The focus was on planning documents and preparatory activities of police officers for hurricanes, the reaction of the police during the Hurricane itself, as well as 6 months after it. The results indicated the fact that police officers were not adequately prepared for the natural disaster. Most police

departments did not have a written plan for the Hurricane. Police officers were not prepared for the coming storm. They were left to fend for themselves, because at the beginning of the emergency, a single command structure was established, which later disintegrated due to the interruption of communications. Unlike the police in Louisiana and Mississippi, the New York police had a developed plan for dealing with the Hurricane before Hurricane Katrina (Adams and Stewart, 2015). Before it approached, executives had timely notifications of its trajectory and instructed police officers to relocate their families from the affected areas within 48 h and return to their duties. Since the circumstances have changed completely (an increase of thefts and violence in the city, destroyed communications due to which the chain of command was interrupted), new plans were adopted in the relocated areas.

When it comes to the pandemic-induced emergencies, Luna *et al.* (2007) conducted one of the first large-scale studies through in-depth case studies in four different police units, which were at different stages of developing plans to counter the flu pandemic. Police units were encouraged to cooperate with local emergency response services, primarily through multi-agency "external planning", which also envisages the role of the police. It has been noted that in "external plans" the description of the role of the police was very often generalized through statements that the police would "assist and support other state bodies and local agencies wherever possible". The "internal" plans of the police did not consider the loss of human resources due to influenza infection and the effect that such a loss would have on the community. When planning a police unit, many factors must be taken into account, which should be categorized through the preparation of the unit, the protection of police officers and the protection of the community.

Some of the factors that police managers should take into account when planning are changes in crime rates and changes in calls made to police units during pandemics. Stickle and Felson (2020) state that "the biggest criminological experiment in history" is taking place because, according to the first statistical data, the crime rate in the United States and around the world has dropped. In contrast to the decline in the overall crime rate, individual rates have increased in some parts, as well as crime rates after a few weeks of the pandemic. Indirectly, the number of calls made to the police can indicate the reduction of crime in society. A study in the United States found that the total number of calls made to the police to provide services during the first weeks of the pandemic, when schools were closed and orders to stay at home were issued, decreased significantly (Ashby, 2020). As Ashby has noted, the reduction in calls was contrary to the expectations of crisis planning studies and experiences in natural disasters, as was the case with hurricanes (Rojek and Smith, 2007), because planners were unable to predict what effect the restricted movement measures would have on the police demand. All of the above data can help the police plan for future pandemics, in terms of deploying more police officers to help the community and less to crime-solving tasks.

Police plans should take into account the stress of police officers in emergencies, which can have long-term consequences, because for some the disaster was over when recovery plans were activated, but for some police officers the disaster remained with them for years after the event (Adams and Anderson, 2019). Regardless of whether it is an emergency caused by natural disasters or terrorist acts, it has been established that police officers experienced high levels of stress during their work in special conditions (Deflem and Sutphin, 2009; McCanlies *et al.*, 2018; Adams and Anderson, 2019; Sukabdi, 2016; Sommer *et al.*, 2017; Varano and Schafer, 2012; Bonkiewicz and Ruback, 2012). The psychological effect of the pandemic will be significant for all members of the community, and police officers are no exception, as they will face mass casualties, bereaved family members and social unrest (Brito *et al.*, 2009). How burdening the stress factor can be is shown by data that during Hurricane Katrina, several police officers committed suicide, and between 9% and 11% of them left their jobs for various reasons (Adams and Stewart, 2015). During the bird flu pandemic in Toronto, rapid response teams, which determined the causes of numerous deaths, needed more rehabilitation breaks due to the stress experienced while wearing protective equipment for a long time (Luna *et al.*,

2007). In order for police organizations to mitigate the consequences of stress in their response plans, measures should be envisaged to relieve the psychological impact on police officers. Currently, the literature lists three approaches to mitigating the psychological impact of critical incidents on police officers: pre-incident stress education, psychological first aid during the initial response and extensive follow-up after the incident (Adams and Anderson, 2019). Just as physical training creates 'physical readiness of police officers, stress education builds psychological resilience to critical incidents that threaten to cause negative psychological consequences (Adams and Anderson, 2019).

A number of studies have examined the increase in police powers during COVID-19 (Sheptycki, 2020; Luscombe and McClelland, 2020), as Sheptycki (2020) calls it "the first global police event". He explains it as an event in which order is imposed worldwide by police methods, increasing police powers (restriction of freedom of movement, use of technical means for surveillance of citizens, control of internal borders, etc.) in response to the same phenomenon in the world, COVID-19. Initially, the idea was that COVID-19 affected everyone equally, however, it disappeared and the class dynamics of the pandemic became increasingly apparent (Luscombe and McClelland, 2020). It is indisputable that the pandemic exists, but in the current crisis, there is a "virus" phenomenon, which seems to be a "suitable enemy" covering police action (Sheptycki, 2020). To determine the patterns of the police action, in the hope of understanding who they are aimed at, what justifications for its use are used by the police, the Policing the Pandemic Mapping Project was launched in Canada at the beginning of COVID-19 (Luscombe and McClelland, 2020). Its goal is to create a repository of publicly available data for the analysis of police work during a pandemic.

The paper that investigated the degree of readiness of Serbian citizens for disasters caused by the COVID-19 virus also examined the First responders' preparedness (police, fire and rescue units, ambulances) (Cvetković et al., 2020). Of all the observed subjects, the citizens considered that these services were the readiest for COVID-19. Younger respondents, aged between 18 and 29 years, assessed preparedness of first responders with the highest grades. As for the information about COVID-19, the citizens are of the opinion that they did not receive a sufficient amount of information from the mentioned services but asked for it via the Internet, TV, family members, friends and only then from members of the mentioned services. It was pointed out that the female population has more confidence than men do in the readiness of the state and the local community to adequately react to the catastrophe caused by COVID-19. In addition, at the time of the pandemic, women had more psychological reactions to COVID-19 than men (Öcal et al., 2020).

As stated earlier, because of the nature of their work, police officers are at higher risk of exposure and infection than COVID-19, and therefore the question arises, what measures should they take to protect themselves and the community (Jennings and Perez, 2020)? In addition to the danger of infection due to close contact, Jennings and Perez also point out the potential intentional contamination of police officers by extremist groups, such as neo-Nazis, who encouraged their members to spread the virus deliberately. To prevent the spread of infection among police officers in the United States, it is recommended that police officers wear protective equipment – disposable gloves, disposable coats or overalls, protective masks (marked N95 and higher) and eye protection (Jennings and Perez, 2020). To prevent further infection, police officers must keep the physical distance, where possible, and in cases where they come into a close contact with an individual during an arrest, they should clean and disinfect all equipment before reuse. One of the measures of the police units was to minimize contacts between officers by suspending training, parades and gatherings, using video conferencing and other technologies, but also by the different organization. To reduce the likelihood that all officers in the unit would be exposed to the virus at the same time, the Tempe Police Department (Arizona) made a 50/50 plan, dividing employees in half and keeping them in two completely separate groups (Jennings and Perez, 2020).

In order to protect the community more effectively, the police should work to create effective and meaningful partnerships with local hospitals, public health departments, fire and rescue services and other entities, in order to pool their knowledge and resources (Jennings and Perez, 2020). The police cannot independently oppose COVID-19, but need to conduct an integrated response through partnerships with other emergency services and with those that can play an important role in recovering from incidents (Varano and Schafer, 2012). As already mentioned, police units are encouraged to cooperate with local emergency response services, primarily through multi-agency "external planning" (Luna *et al.*, 2007). Rural police units often do not have any such partner institution, or if they do, they lack the capacity and resources they have in larger cities and therefore the heads of such units are forced to seek advice elsewhere (Hansen and Lory, 2020). It is necessary for police units to maintain stocks of protective equipment carried by police officers, and in this direction, it is possible to provide joint procurement and sharing of storage space with other agencies engaged in emergencies (Brito *et al.*, 2009).

Method
The research was designed to determine the perception of general public on the Serbian police behaviors in combating COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the perception of the citizens how successful the police units were in fulfilling their tasks. Due to the state of emergency declared due to COVID-19 pandemic, in particular the restriction of movement and the need for social distance, the data collection for this study had to be conducted via the online survey platform (Google.doc). The study was conducted during March–April 2020, only four weeks after the state of emergency was declared. The participants were invited to complete the online questionnaire in their native language by using the snowball sampling strategy focused on recruiting the general public via social media tools (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.). This research conformed to the Helsinki Declaration, outlining the principles for socio-medical research involving human subjects and participants provided informed consent to participate in the study. Socioeconomic and demographic data were collected on gender, age, marital status, education, income level and contact with the police. The questionnaire was answered by adults aged 18 and over.

Socioeconomic and demographic characteristics
In total, 325 respondents completed the questionnaire and before the analysis, all data were controlled. Bearing in mind the complexity of conducting the research in the state of emergency conditions, the survey respondents, 63.96% women and 36.04% men, were not representative of the gendered stratification of the country that registers 51.3% of women and 48.7% of men (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2016). The average age of respondents was 22.41 years of age, and the most represented category was the young (234; 72.4%). From the sample, it appears that the majority (71.5%) have a bachelor's degree or are undergraduate, and very few completed a primary school (11.1%). When the marital status is in question, there were 45.2% of those who are single, 44.3% are in a relationship and 10.5% are married. The survey respondents selected also reflected the different status of income level, the majority (31.3%) had monthly household income level from 466 to 740 US$ (Table 1).

Questionnaire design
A structured questionnaire developed by using close-ended, multiple-choice questions and 5-point Likert scale questions (1 for strongly disagree to 5 for strongly agree) was used in the study. Within the first part of the questionnaire, there were questions concerning demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents (gender, age, marital status, education, income level, contact with the police), while the second part contained questions about the perception of general public on the Serbian police behaviors in combating COVID-19 (e.g. questions related to those variables – wear protective masks, wear protective

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	120 (36.04)
	Female	213 (63.96)
Age	18–22	234 (72.4)
	29–38	65 (20.1)
	39–48	24 (7.4)
Marital status	Single	146 (45.2)
	In a relationship	143 (44.3)
	Married	34 (10.5)
Education	High school	56 (17.3)
	Bachelor or undergraduate	231 (71.5)
	Master/doctorate	36 (11.1)
	Married	36 (11.1)
Income level	Up to 275 $	24 (7.4)
	276 to 465 $	92 (28.5)
	466 to 740 $	101 (31.3)
Contact with the police	Yes	28 (8.7)
	No	261 (80.8)
	Yes, many times	34 (10.5)

Table 1.
Basic socioeconomic
and demographic
information of
respondents ($n = 323$)

gloves, have the appropriate equipment, keep distance, level of training, more conversations and explanations, strict movement control, self-isolation control, trust in the police, level of preparedness, etc.). Several published survey approaches were consulted and (Cvetković *et al.*, 2018; Spasić and Radovanović, 2019; Brown and Benedict, 2002) adapted according to COVID-19 in Serbia. During March 2020, a pilot pre-test of the questionnaire was conducted in Belgrade with 35 people with the aim of checking the comprehensibility and performance of the questionnaire via online systems.

Analyses and measurement
In this study, the demographic characteristics of the respondents were calculated using descriptive statistics. The central hypothesis of which gender is a predicting variable of the public perception of the police was tested using a multivariate regression analysis, which was used to identify the extent to which seven main independent variables were associated with seven socioeconomic variables: gender, age, marital status, education, income level and contact with the police. According to Table 3 categories, males, young, single people, high school, low income, has contact with police, Serbia, have been coded as 0; 1 has been assigned otherwise. Previous analyses showed that the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homogeneity of variance had not been violated. The analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) was used to examine the relation of gender and variables on the general public perception of the police. All tests were two-tailed, with a significance level of $p < 0.05$. The correlation results between age and total scores and subscales were investigated using Pearson's linear correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to prove that the assumptions of normality, linearity and homogeneity of variance were satisfied. The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of the overall scale was 0.821. Each subscale ranged from 0.81 for the Preparedness subscale (5 items), 0.83 for the Protective equipment subscale (4 items) and 0.82 for the Competence subscale (5 items) (Figure 1).

Results
According to the results, 76.5% of respondents state that police officers of the MoI wear face masks in contact with citizens during the Coronavirus pandemic ($\overline{X} = 4.25$), while 65% of

respondents state they wear protective gloves during contact with citizens ($\overline{X} = 4.01$). In addition, 68.7% of respondents state the police officers have all the necessary protective equipment ($\overline{X} = 3.95$). When preventive measures are in question, 3.25% of respondents state that police officers keep a distance of 1.5–2 m when contacting citizens during the pandemic. In contrast, 26.3% of respondents state that police officers are generally well trained in responding to the pandemic ($\overline{X} = 2.81$).

In addition, about 52.4% of respondents also point out that police officers should spend more time talking to people about their daily problems ($\overline{X} = 3.18$). About 53.7% of the respondents indicate that police officers should spend more time talking to citizens to inform and clarify the measures taken by the state to combat the disease ($\overline{X} = 3.09$). Considering the importance of movement control restrictions, 71.5% of the respondents point out that police officers should control citizens' movements during curfew during the pandemic ($\overline{X} = 3.94$). When it comes to self-isolation, 79.6% of respondents say that members of the police should control citizens isolated in their apartments several times a day ($\overline{X} = 4.38$). In addition, 78.3% of the respondents believe that members of the police should be more consistent in controlling the measure of banning 65-year-olds from leaving their home ($\overline{X} = 4.59$). When it comes to trust in the work of police officers, 61.9% of the respondents point out that members of the police do their job well and have full confidence in the police ($\overline{X} = 4.33$). A small number of respondents, 62.6%, believe that police officers, after health workers, play the most significant role in combating the coronavirus ($\overline{X} = 3.75$) in the society. When it comes to preparedness, 69.3% say that the police are prepared for emergency response caused by the pandemic ($\overline{X} = 3.99$) (Table 2).

The results of the multivariate regressions of public perception preparedness subscale show that the most important predictor is gender ($\beta = -0.236$), and it explains 23.6% of the variance in preparedness subscale. The remaining variables (e.g. age, marital status, education level) did not have significant effects on preparedness. This model ($R^2 = 0.079$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.061$, $F = 4.50$, $t = 25.08$, $p = 0.000$), with all mentioned independent variables, explains 6.1% of the variance of preparedness subscale. Further analysis showed that the most important predictor of the perception that police are wearing protective equipment is the contact with the police ($\beta = -0.247$), and it explains 24.7% of the variance in wearing protective equipment. The remaining variables did not have significant effects on protective equipment. This model ($R^2 = 0.065$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.047$, $F = 3.65$, $t = 24.39$, $p = 0.002$) with all mentioned independent variables explains 6.1% of the variance of preparedness. The analysis showed that the most important predictor of competence subscale is gender ($\beta = -0.110$), and it explains 11% of the variance incompetence followed by the marital status

	Mean	Yes (%)	Not sure (%)	No (%)
Wear protective masks	4.25 (0.05)	76.5	19.2	4.3
Wear protective gloves	4.01 (0.04)	65	20	15
Have the equipment	3.95 (0.061)	68.7	18.6	12.7
Keep distance	3.25 (0.070)	42.71	33.1	24.1
Well trained	2.81 (0.069)	26.3	34.4	39.3
More conversation with people	3.18 (0.073)	52.4	30.3	27.2
More conversations and explanations	3.09 (0.080)	53.7	18.9	37.5
Strict movement control	3.94 (0.067)	71.5	13.3	15.2
Self-isolation	4.38 (0.060)	79.6	11.1	9.3
More severe curfew control	4.59 (0.050)	78.3	7.1	11.8
Trust in the police	4.33 (0.058)	61.9	11.8	18.3
Most important role in combating	3.75 (0.055)	62.2	26.3	11.5
Preparedness	3.99 (0.060)	69.3	18.6	12.1

Table 2.
Results of a descriptive analysis public perception of police behaviors ($n = 325$)

Predictor variable	Preparedness subscale			Protective equipment subscale			Competence subscale			Total score		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Gender	−0.583	0.136	−0.236**	−0.030	0.141	−0.012	−0.315	0.161	−0.110*	−3.593	1.178	−0.171*
Age	0.111	0.158	0.038	0.013	0.164	0.004	0.308	0.187	0.091	1.312	1.370	0.053
Marital status	0.028	0.118	0.013	0.039	0.122	0.018	0.271	0.140	0.108*	1.517	1.026	0.082
Education level	0.153	0.156	0.054	−0.184	0.162	−0.063	0.111	0.185	0.033	−1.124	1.355	−0.046
Income level	−0.065	0.224	−0.016	0.327	0.231	0.077	−0.241	0.265	−0.051	0.899	1.939	0.026
Contact with the police	0.406	0.214	0.106	−0.975	0.222	−0.247*	−0.296	0.254	−0.067	−2.479	1.860	−0.076

Note(s): *p = 0.05. **p ≤ 0.01

Table 3.
Results of a
multivariate regression
analysis of public
perception of police
behaviors (n = 325)
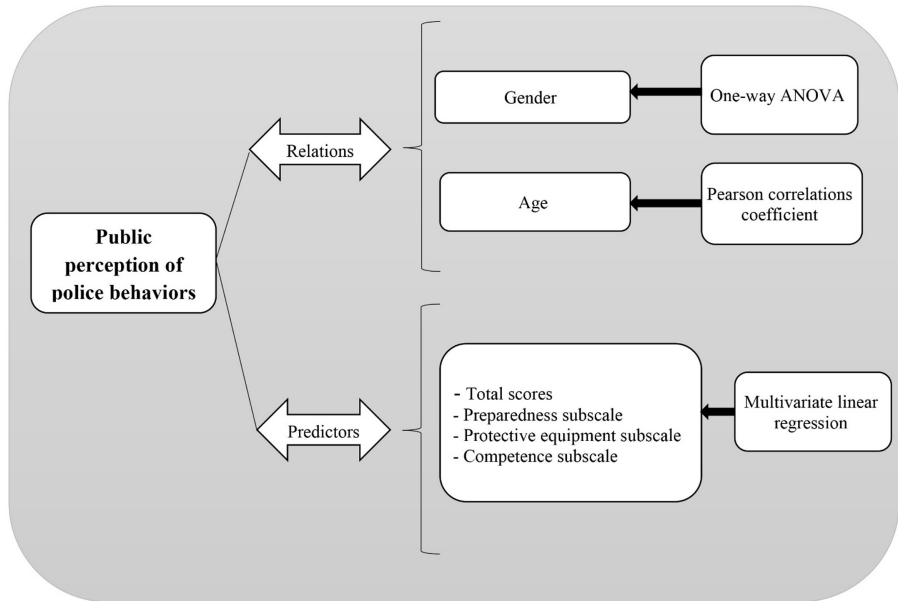
Figure 1.
The study design

($\beta = -0.108$). The remaining variables did not have significant effects on protective equipment. This model ($R^2 = 0.065$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.016$, $F = 1.88$, $t = 13.47$, $p = 0.000$) with all mentioned independent variables explains 1.6% of the variance of preparedness. Related to the total score it was found that that the most important predictor of total score is gender ($\beta = -0.171$), and it explains 17.1% of the variance in the total score. The remaining variables did not have significant effects on the total score. This model ($R^2 = 0.041$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.023$, $F = 2.26$, $t = 37.19$, $p = 0.000$) with all mentioned independent variables explains 6.1% of the variance of preparedness (Table 3).

The correlation results between age and total scores and subscales were investigated using Pearson's linear correlation coefficient. The correlation between age and observed variables $p > 0.0001$ was not found (Table 4).

ANOVA results showed that gender had significant effects on variables keep distance ($p = 0.002$), more conversations with people ($p = 0.000$) and preparedness ($p = 0.000$). Specifically, women ($\overline{X} = 3.32$, SD $= 1.18$) point out that police officers keep a prescribed distance of 1.5–2 m when performing their duties more than men ($\overline{X} = 3.04$, SD $= 1.43$). In addition, women ($\overline{X} = 3.36$, SD $= 1.23$) more than men ($\overline{X} = 2.68$, SD $= 1.39$) are likely to state that police officers should spend more time talking with people about their daily problems during the pandemic. Also, women ($\overline{X} = 4.15$, SD $= 0.935$) are more likely than men ($\overline{X} = 3.53$, SD $= 1.31$) to evaluate the level of police preparedness for emergency response. Finally, women ($\overline{X} = 52.89$, SD $= 8.53$) were found to score total police preparedness more likely than men ($\overline{X} = 49.37$, SD $= 10.51$) (Table 5).

Discussion
The citizens evaluated that, during COVID-19 pandemic, the police officers adhere to most of the prescribed health measures, such as wearing protective masks and gloves, but not the recommended distance of 1 m minimum, so that the virus would not be transmitted (World Health Organization, 2020). This is to be expected because due to the nature of their work

(arrests, use of coercive means and the like) it is impossible for police officers to keep the social distance, but it is necessary to additionally disinfect all the equipment before reuse (Jennings and Perez, 2020). The respondents of both genders think the police officers are not well trained for police tasks during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings indicate that the police are unprepared for COVID-19, just as they were not previously prepared for emergencies caused by natural disasters (Rojek and Smith, 2007; Adams and Stewart, 2015) or terrorist attacks (Sommer *et al.*, 2017). This indirectly indicates, as noted in previous studies (Varano and Schafer, 2012; Sommer *et al.*, 2017) that learning activities in policing are focused on day-to-day policing rather than new crises. This could be expected because this pandemic is a new, unexplored field for the whole society, doctors and the police officers as well. The police all over the world are in this situation. Besides the difficult working condition for performing regular tasks, the police have to do entirely new, unspecific tasks. The respondents (mostly women) believe that the police should spend more time in conversation with citizens. This is understandable, because the citizens are confused and afraid, without comprehensive information on how to behave during the pandemic, how to protect from the virus, how not to violate legal restrictions and the like. Studies about COVID-19 have shown that women have more psychological reactions to COVID-19 than men (Öcal *et al.*, 2020), because they are more sensitive by nature, and have more confidence in government agencies to respond to the pandemic (Cvetković *et al.*, 2020). Women perceive talking to a police officer, who they trust, more as a conversation of support than the one for obtaining information. The respondents think the police can play a major role, as pointed out by Lusombe and McClelland in their study (2020), to calm the citizens who panic and to provide reliable information. However, although the citizens believe police officers are unprepared for the COVID-19 pandemic, they have a high degree of trust in them. We have to emphasize that the research was conducted

Scale					
Age	–	−0.012	0.010	−0.028	0.008
Preparedness		–	0.284**	0.376**	0.510**
Protective equipment			–	0.315**	0.673**
Competence				–	0.675**
Total score				0.675**	–
Note(s): **$p \leq 0.01$					

Table 4.
Pearson correlation test results between age and preparedness, protective equipment and competence subscales ($n = 325$)

	Male	Female	Gender
Wear protective masks	4.26 (0.976)	4.25 (0.949)	0.008 (0.929)
Wear protective gloves	4.11 (0.875)	4.09 (0.847)	0.028 (0.1.02)
Have the equipment	4.00 (1.11)	3.93 (1.11)	0.222 (0.638)
Keep distance	3.04 (1.43)	3.32 (1.18)	10.01 (0.002)*
Well trained	2.61 (1.23)	2.88 (1.25)	2.95 (0.087)
More conversations with people	2.68 (1.39)	3.36 (1.23)	17.14 (0.000)**
Strict movement control	3.77 (1.53)	4.01 (1.08)	2.28 (0.132)
Self-isolation	4.56 (1.01)	4.32 (1.09)	3.08 (0.080)
More severe curfew control	4.61 (0.934)	4.58 (0.906)	0.072 (0.789)
Trust in the police	4.30 (1.03)	4.34 (1.05)	0.092 (0.762)
Important role of the police	3.59 (1.04)	3.81 (0.972)	3.20 (0.074)
Preparedness	3.53 (1.31)	4.15 (0.935)	21.90 (0.000)**
Total score	49.37 (10.51)	52.89 (8.53)	8.58 (0.004)
Note(s): *$p = 0.05$. **$p \leq 0.01$			

Table 5.
One-way ANOVA results of different groups of independent variables and variables on the public perception of police behaviors

during the pandemic, unlike all other similar studies. Although the police implement significant measures that limit human rights, such as the curfew that lasts for several days, it could be expected that the level of trust would decrease in comparison to those in normal, peaceful conditions. However, if compared to the recent research conducted in Serbia (Spasić and Radovanović, 2019) during ordinary conditions, the trust in the police has increased slightly (4.25:4.33). How can we explain this phenomenon? Since the pandemic was a new experience for citizens, they could only turn to the state, and indirectly to the police as the representative of the state, because they were implementing measures imposed by the state. The respondents believe that, after medical workers, the police plays a significant role in combating COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

Studies related to the role of the police during an epidemic have not been found in the literature so far. The aim of the authors was to determine how citizens see the work of the police during the pandemic. The research proved that the police play an important role in combating the COVID-19 pandemic; the citizens trust the police, but the officers are not trained enough for work in such an emergency. In the following period, more attention should be paid to the education of police officers for performing tasks during various disasters as epidemics and pandemics. It is necessary to implement training for police officers, starting from the use of protective equipment (putting it on/taking off), recognizing symptoms of the disease and treating citizens infected with a particular virus. In addition to training, police units must have sufficient material resources (masks, gloves, safety glasses, etc.) from the first moment of the epidemic. It is necessary to establish work plans in such an emergency situation so that in the future it is clear who, how and when to act, in order to avoid situations in which police officers act differently, sometimes inappropriately, in the field. The organization of work must be adapted to new situations. In order to reduce the possible transmission of viruses among police officers, shifts of police officers should start and end at different times. The number of shifts during 24 h should be reduced, e.g. by extending patrol work from 8 to 12 h. Police officers who have a history of chronic diseases should be sent to the annual or paid leave.

The flaw of the survey would be that it is limited to the territory of Serbia and does not have a large sample of respondents. Notwithstanding the foregoing, this research may be the starting point for conducting future research, especially comparative ones, those that will present the role of police during the pandemic in other countries. It would contribute to improving police behavior by identifying best practices during the pandemic, but also by highlighting the mistakes of police units during the previous period.

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