

# Police legitimacy in urban, suburban and rural settings: a study in Slovenia

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Police legitimacy presents a social value of the institution based on citizens' normative, moral and ethical feelings that they should voluntarily comply with and support the authority of the police. The present study focuses on residents' perceptions of police legitimacy in different settings in Slovenia.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Drawing on data from a survey of 1,022 citizens in Slovenia, this study examined the correlates of police legitimacy and differences in citizen perceptions of police legitimacy in urban, suburban and rural settings.

**Findings** – Multivariate statistical analyses showed that feelings of obligation to obey, trust in police, procedural justice, police effectiveness, relations with police officers and gender influence perceptions of police legitimacy. Significant differences between residents' perceptions of police legitimacy, obligation to obey, trust in police, procedural justice, police effectiveness and legal cynicism in urban, suburban and rural settings were also observed. In general, residents of rural areas were found to have more positive attitudes towards the police than those in urban and suburban settings.

**Practical implications** – The article is useful for police leaders and practitioners planning policies and training of police officers for democratic policing.

**Social implications** – Police legitimacy reflects the legitimacy of governance, as the police are the most visible representatives of the state authority. Therefore, police legitimacy is crucial for policing in urban, suburban and rural settings.

**Originality/value** – The study presents the first test of police legitimacy in a non-Western cultural environment based on a national sample of citizens, which enables the generalisation of concepts of legitimacy, and its correlates in a different cultural setting. The study also presents the first attempt to test and compare the effect of the settings (i.e. rural, suburban and urban) on variables influencing residents' perceptions of police legitimacy.

**Keywords** Legitimacy, Police, Residents, Settings, Slovenia

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The fundamental difference between legitimate and illegitimate power lies in the ability of those in power to honour citizens (Williams, 2005). Tyler (2011) argued that police officers represent the moral values of a community, and in this context, they claim to be the legitimate power holders, to which citizens respond (confirming or rejecting their claim). Consequently,

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police officers might adjust the nature of the claim, resulting in lasting legitimacy dialogues between themselves and the citizens (Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012; Meško and Hacin, 2023). As Bradford *et al.* (2014) pointed out, citizens' acknowledgement of police legitimacy (i.e. the moral authority of police officers to act lawfully and in citizens' best interest) presents a crucial element in their relations with police officers and willingness to cooperate with the police.

The complexity of police legitimacy, that is, in a broader sense, the perceived legitimacy of the power-holder by recipients, can be seen in its unstable nature, as it is based on legitimacy dialogues between police officers and citizens. Such dialogues depend on the specific feature of the time and place in which they occur, drawing attention to the impact of cultural settings (Meško and Hacin, 2023; Reisig and Meško, 2009). Nix *et al.* (2020) highlighted the importance of relations between police officers and the community; however, the differences between communities are profound and affect the [primary] role (or rather position) of police officers. The most obvious differences can be observed between urban (and suburban) and rural areas. In comparison to other areas, in the villages (1) higher trust among the residents, (2) common interests and frequent assistance among neighbours, (3) a greater sense of belonging to the community, (4) better awareness of neighbours and other residents and (5) less crime, which can be, at least in part, attributed to strong informal social control in rural areas, are characteristic (Glaeser and Sacerdote, 1999; Hacin and Eman, 2019).

In 2022, almost half of the population in Slovenia lived in rural areas, with its specific "ethos" and cultural norms. The characteristics of urbanisation Slovenia in 2022 can be set out as follows: 406,222 residents lived in high-density urban areas (19.3%), 758,673 residents lived in small towns and suburbs (36%) and 942,285 or 44.7% resided in rural areas (Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, n.d.). While Meško and Hacin (2023) confirmed the differences in factors influencing the self-legitimacy of police officers working in Slovenian urban and rural settings, no such comparative study was conducted on residents' perceptions of police legitimacy in different ecological settings. The present study focuses on residents' perceptions of police legitimacy in Slovenia. Specifically, it draws on data from a survey of residents in 24 municipalities in Slovenia in 2022 to identify and compare factors that influence the perceptions of police legitimacy by residents living in rural, suburban, and urban areas. The paper proceeds as follows: First, a theoretical concept of police legitimacy and variables related to legitimacy are described and police force and policing in Slovenia are presented. Second, the empirical study on police legitimacy in Slovenia is presented, and methods for testing theoretical assumptions are delineated. Lastly, findings from the statistical analyses are presented, and their implications are discussed in the final part of the paper.

### **The concept of police legitimacy**

Legitimacy presents a social value of the institution based on the normative, moral and ethical feelings of citizens that they should voluntarily comply with its authority (Beetham, 1991; Tyler, 2006). The legitimacy of the police is based on (1) legality (lawful behaviour of police officers), (2) common values (moral values that are present in the wider society and which the police officers also internalise) and (3) consent (the moral duty of citizens to comply with police authority) (Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012; Tyler and Jackson, 2012). Police legitimacy is defined as the belief of citizens that police officers have the authority to dictate individuals' behaviour and demand cooperation. The latter is deemed crucial for the effective functioning of the police as a social institution (Carr *et al.*, 2007). The police have a difficult task in establishing and maintaining the legitimacy of their own position in the

eyes of the public because, as Goldsmith (2005) pointed out, the police find it difficult to gain citizens' trust but can easily lose it. Ponsaers (2015) suggested that police should "solve" the problem of legitimacy by gaining the trust of residents, as trust in authority presents an essential component of police legitimacy. The trust between police officers and residents affects the willingness of the latter to cooperate with the police.

In cases where citizens recognise the legitimacy of the police, they "allow" officers to exercise authority (regulation of behavioural norms) with which they voluntarily comply (Kocheil, 2012; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003). The perception of the legitimacy of police officers, as justified holders of authority and power in society, could positively affect citizens' willingness to cooperate with them (Hinds, 2009). However, if citizens do not recognise the legitimacy of police, this can potentially lead to a decrease in interactions between police officers and citizens, reduced willingness of citizens to cooperate with the police (e.g. reluctance to report crime, share information, etc.) and disregard for laws. Tyler (2006) highlighted that citizens who do not recognise the legitimacy of police will control their behaviour, in terms of compliance with the law, only in the "presence" of police officers, which highlights the problem of maintaining order over a long period of time, since the police do not have the means to maintain a presence at all times (even if only in certain areas). Bradford *et al.* (2013) pointed out that criminal justice institutions (mainly the police) can strengthen citizens' normative commitment to authority and law through behaviour based on just and fair use of power.

The basis of an individual's interaction with the police presents the perception of police officers' exercise of power and authority. Procedural justice, which refers to the impartial implementation of the law, as well as the fair, respectful and equal (i.e. equal to all) exercise of power, presents an essential element in police legitimacy (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2006). Procedural justice expresses neutrality and transparency in the form of fair and equitable treatment, which leads to the perception of citizens and police officers that they are "on the same side" (Hirschman, 1970). Police legitimacy, based on procedural justice, derives from the quality of services that individuals receive from police officers and the fairness of their procedures (Tyler, 2006).

Tyler and Fagan (2008) emphasized that the police exercise social control in the form of instrumental (citizens do not break the law and cooperate with the police due to fear of sanctions) and normative compliance of citizens with laws (citizens do not break the law and cooperate with the police because they see them as a legitimate power in society). Sunshine and Tyler (2003) wrote that within the instrumental model, the police achieve and maintain legitimacy based on their effectiveness in fighting crime. Most residents obey laws and comply with the authority of criminal justice institutions (primarily the police), not out of fear of sanctions but due to the internalised sense that this is the right/proper behaviour – a recognition of legitimacy to the authority (Bradford *et al.*, 2013). Contrary to citizens' fear of being sanctioned by the police, high police legitimacy is associated with lower crime rates (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler and Fagan, 2008).

Hinds and Murphy (2007) exposed the effective control of crime and disorder in the community as an instrumental aspect of police legitimacy. The ineffectiveness of the police or police services signals to individuals or entire communities that they are excluded or forgotten, which weakens their belief that the police are on their "side" and that they share the same values with police officers (Bradford *et al.*, 2014). An individual's perception of the police is affected by his or her experiences with the police, especially situations in which police officers acted [un]justly (Hawdon, 2008). At the same time, the very perception of police fairness is influenced by citizens' expectations of police effectiveness (Reisig and Chandek, 2001). In addition to effectiveness, the instrumental aspect of police legitimacy consists of equal treatment of all residents regardless of demographic or social characteristics and effective deterrence of offenders (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003). The

normative aspect of police legitimacy, on the other hand, focuses on the procedural justice of police officers in their interactions with citizens, which combines the elements of neutrality, respect, trust and “voice” (Tyler, 2006).

Tyler (1997) highlighted the importance of relations between citizens and police officers in ensuring the legitimacy of the police in the broader society. From an empirical (practical) perspective, legitimacy depends on the individual’s assessment of police officers’ conduct and behaviour (following the rules in the implementation of procedures) and his motivation for entering into relations with police officers (behaviour in accordance with the recognition of the specific role of police officers in society). The trust created between police officers and citizens through established relations affects the willingness of the latter to cooperate with the police in ensuring safety and security. To the extent that police officers establish trust among citizens, they can use the informal networks they create to prevent crime and solve security/crime problems (Hawdon *et al.*, 2003).

Individual characteristics of citizens that influence their perceptions of police legitimacy include (1) ethnic or racial affiliation, (2) age, (3) gender, (4) education, (5) employment status and (6) home ownership (Meško *et al.*, 2012; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tankebe, 2009; Tyler, 2006).

#### *Police legitimacy in different contexts*

In modern democratic societies, police legitimacy rests on public consent (Hinds and Murphy, 2007); however, the question arises if the same can be argued for countries that are not democratic or have limited experience with democracy (e.g. young democracies, former authoritarian countries, etc.). Brown and Reisig (2019) argued that the social-psychological benefits of police legitimacy are equivalent across individual, cultural and ecological contexts (i.e. the invariance hypothesis). In other words, the effect of fair legal processes transcends situations, time and space. In contrast, Bottoms and Tankebe (2021) emphasised that factors influencing legitimacy vary significantly in different social contexts. The empirical results are mixed and support both claims. While several studies (e.g. Jackson *et al.*, 2012; Wolfe *et al.*, 2016) confirmed the invariance hypothesis others have not (e.g. Jackson *et al.*, 2012; Murphy, 2017; Zahnow *et al.*, 2019).

The number of studies on police legitimacy increased significantly in recent years, most of them implemented in Western democracies (e.g. USA, UK and Australia). The results of these studies mostly supported two models of police legitimacy: Tyler’s (2003) process-based model and Tankebe’s (2013) model. The results from studies conducted in other (non-Western) cultural environments highlighted differences in the perception of police legitimacy. For example, Tankebe (2009) demonstrated the lack of empirical validity of the Sunshine–Tyler scale and exposed the importance of instrumental judgements (police effectiveness) on individuals’ perception of police legitimacy in Ghana. Similar findings can be found in Chinese studies (Sun *et al.*, 2017), where police effectiveness presents the dominant factor influencing police legitimacy. While in Ghanaian and Chinese studies, procedural justice had a limited effect on police legitimacy, it was identified as the strongest factor predicting police legitimacy in Jamaica (Reisig and Lloyd, 2009) and Slovenia (Meško *et al.*, 2012). Hough *et al.* (2013) highlighted the differences between European countries in citizens’ trust in police effectiveness and fairness, moral alignment and obligation to obey the police and perceived legality of the police. In general, citizens’ of former socialist countries expressed less trust in police effectiveness and fairness, and felt less morally obligated to obey police officers.

Interactions between police officers and residents present the foundation of building procedurally just policing, which signals to the latter that they belong to a society with

shared values and moral purpose (Tyler, 2006). Schaap and Saarikokomäki (2022) argued that police-citizen relations go beyond only direct contacts, as they also involve interpretations of other situations, hearsay, and collective experiences, where other members of the community (e.g. family and friends) play important roles. In rural areas, such effects on the interpretations of relations are even more profound as police officers are often residents and active members of local communities where they work. The nature of relations between police officers and residents of rural areas (whether the latter are in the role of a victim or offender) is more intense and personal, as in contrast to police officers in urban areas, individuals usually know each other (Weisheit *et al.*, 1994). While research on police legitimacy in rural areas is (very) limited (e.g. Bradford *et al.*, 2013; Taylor *et al.*, 2015), it can be assumed that the interconnectedness of community members in rural areas mediate the rigorosity of policing, compared to urban environments (Hacin and Eman, 2019), which in turn has a positive effect on residents' perception of police legitimacy.

### A brief note on the Slovenian police and policing

The Slovenian police is a body of the Ministry of the Interior that, in 1992, replaced the former militia (Meško and Lobnikar, 2018). It is a centralised force, organizationally divided into (1) national level (General Police Directorate), (2) regional level (eight Police directorates) and (3) local level (111 police stations). In 2022, Slovenian police employed 8,412 individuals. Community policing is prioritised in Slovenia and comprises activities focused on improving the partnership between the police and local communities and other state and civil actors, greater visibility of police officers in neighbourhoods, and increased sense of safety, trust and satisfaction with the police with residents (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve, Policija, 2023). In recent years, public opinion regarding the police shifted considerably, as its reputation was tarnished during the COVID-19 pandemic when police officers exercised strict control over the inhabitants (including the use of coercive means at demonstrations). In 2023, the reputation of police officers in the communities rose again, due to their assistance to people affected by catastrophic floods that Slovenia experienced in the summer months.

### Methods

The study took place in 24 municipalities across Slovenia. The survey instrument was first developed by Tyler (2002) for measuring police legitimacy in the United States and later modified to suit different cultural environments (Sun *et al.*, 2017; Tankebe, 2008). The questionnaire used in the current study comprises questions on residents' perceptions of police legitimacy, obligation to obey the police, trust in police, procedural justice, police effectiveness, legal cynicism and relations with police officers. All parts of the questionnaire were pre-tested in different studies on legitimacy in Slovenia (Hacin and Meško, 2020; Meško *et al.*, 2012). The survey was implemented in person (face-to-face) in 24 Slovenian municipalities in the second half of 2022. Municipalities were selected based on (1) the size of the municipality (geographic area and population density) (eight large, eight medium and eight small municipalities were selected), (2) the level of urbanisation (eight urban municipalities and 16 non-urban municipalities) and (3) the location of the municipality (within each of the eight police directorates one large, one medium and one small municipality). The selection criteria were implemented to ensure the (initial) representability of the sample. The survey began with the introduction of the study to residents randomly selected in the public areas and at their place of residence (i.e. going door to door), after which

questionnaires were distributed to individuals who after the presentation of the study agreed to participate (paper and pencil method). Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and data were entered and analysed using the SPSS program, using factor, bivariate, regression and discriminant analyses.

*Participants*

In total, 1,145 residents of Slovenian municipalities participated in the survey; however, only fully completed questionnaires were included in the analysis (1,022 residents). The sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. Residents were divided into groups based on their self-declared place of residence (i.e. rural, suburban and urban), with the majority of respondents living in rural areas (46.6%), followed by residents in urban (31.5%) and suburban areas (21.9%). The overall percentage of male respondents (48.4%) was representative in each area. Overall, 42.8% of respondents achieved some form of higher education, and was higher in urban areas than in rural and suburban areas. The average age of respondents was 41.4 years. To a certain extent, the sample characteristics reflect the characteristics of the Slovenian population in 2022 (e.g. 44.7% of the population resided in rural areas; percentage of males: 50.2%; average age: 43.9 years) (Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, n.d.).

*Measures*

In total, 36 variables were included in the factor analyses (see Supplementary material). The scale of the variables included reflects residents' perceptions of the measured variables rather than the actual measure of observed variables. Modified factors were formed based on the findings of previous studies on police legitimacy (e.g. Meško et al., 2012; Sun et al., 2017). A principal axis analysis with rotation varimax was used. Each of the factors (1) police legitimacy, (2) obligation to obey, (3) trust in police, (4) procedural justice, (5) police effectiveness, (6) legal cynicism and (7) relations with police, represents a small number of variables, simplifying the interpretation (Abdi, 2003). Factors scores were calculated as a sum of variables (weighted averages of factors are reported), which highly correlated with the factor (the cut-off value was set at 0.45). All items included in the factor analysis featured a five-point Likert-type response ranging from "strongly disagree" (coded 1) to "strongly agree" (coded 5). Three socio-economic variables were included in the regression analyses to control for spuriousness. Age was measured in years. Two binary-coded variables (1 = yes,

		Rural		Suburban		Urban	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	226	47.5	107	47.8	162	50.3
	Female	250	52.5	117	52.2	160	49.7
Education	High school or less	291	61.1	130	58.0	164	50.9
	Higher education	185	38.9	94	42.0	158	49.1
Age		<i>M</i> = 40.8, Median = 40, Mode = 20, Min. = 18, Max. = 88		<i>M</i> = 43.8, Median = 43, Mode = 55, Min. = 18, Max. = 94		<i>M</i> = 41.1, Median = 40, Mode = 24, Min. = 18, Max. = 87	

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics **Note(s):** *n* = 1,022; *M*-mean **Source(s):** Table by the authors

0 = no) – Gender (male) and Education (high school or lower) were included. Gender (male): The normality assumption of dependent variables (i.e. Police legitimacy) was tested graphically using a histogram, Q-Q plot, and P-P plot (residuals). The observed variable, as well as residuals, were normally distributed.

**Results**

In the first step, a Pearson’s correlation test was conducted to establish initial associations between police legitimacy and other variables included in the analysis and to test the problem of multicollinearity (Table 2). Obligation to obey ( $r = 0.33; p < 0.01$ ), trust in police ( $r = 0.75; p < 0.01$ ), procedural justice ( $r = 0.82; p < 0.01$ ), police effectiveness ( $r = 0.48; p < 0.01$ ), legal cynicism ( $r = 0.14; p < 0.01$ ) and relations with police officers ( $r = 0.53; p < 0.01$ ) were all positively correlated with residents’ perception of police legitimacy. Results of the Pearson’s test rule out threats of multicollinearity, as observed correlations were lower than 0.90. Correlations higher than 0.90 are deemed problematic, as they make it impossible to obtain unique estimates of the regression coefficients because there are an infinite number of combinations of coefficients that would work equally well (Field, 2009). Further diagnostic tests confirmed the initial assessment as the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) for variables was less than 2.94 (Table 3).

The examination of predictors of residents’ perceptions of police legitimacy in rural, suburban and urban areas by applying multiple regression analysis with robust standard errors tackling the problem of clustering of respondents in different settings took place, which results are displayed in Table 3. Police legitimacy in rural areas was influenced by (1) trust in police ( $\beta = 0.26; p < 0.001$ ), (2) procedural justice ( $\beta = 0.56; p < 0.001$ ) and (3) relation with police officers ( $\beta = 0.09; p < 0.001$ ). Residents’ experiences with police officers’ fairness in procedures involving them have the greatest influence on their perceptions of police legitimacy. Moreover, trust in police and good relations with police officers influence residents’ perceptions of the police as a legitimate institution in society. Overall, the model explained 73.8% of the variance in perception of police legitimacy of residents sampled.

Residents’ perceptions of police legitimacy in suburban areas was influenced by (1) obligation to obey ( $\beta = 0.10; p < 0.05$ ), (2) trust in police ( $\beta = 0.24; p < 0.01$ ), (3) procedural justice ( $\beta = 0.45; p < 0.001$ ), (4) police effectiveness ( $\beta = 0.16; p < 0.001$ ), (5) relations with police officers ( $\beta = 0.15; p < 0.01$ ) and (6) gender ( $\beta = -0.09; p < 0.05$ ). Similarly to residents of rural areas, trust in police, relations with police officers and procedural justice influence the perception of police legitimacy by residents of suburban areas. Procedural justice had the greatest impact on residents’ perception of police legitimacy. Moreover, feelings of obligation

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Police legitimacy	–						
Obligation to obey	0.33**	–					
Trust in police	0.75**	0.33**	–				
Procedural justice	0.82**	0.32**	0.76**	–			
Police effectiveness	0.48**	0.11**	0.39**	0.49**	–		
Legal cynicism	0.14**	0.20**	0.14**	0.16**	0.02	–	
Relations with police officers	0.53**	0.09**	0.46**	0.49**	0.34**	0.07*	–

Note(s):  $n = 1,022$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

Source(s): Table by the authors

**Table 2.** Correlation matrix for key variables

**Table 3.**  
OLS regression  
analysis: predicting  
police legitimacy

	Rural			Suburban			Urban					
	$\beta$	s.e.	t	VIF	$\beta$	s.e.	t	VIF	$\beta$	s.e.	t	VIF
Obligation to obey	0.05	0.03	1.71	1.20	0.10	0.04	2.51*	1.18	0.08	0.04	2.21*	1.29
Trust in police	0.26	0.05	5.99***	2.42	0.24	0.07	3.29**	2.65	0.22	0.06	3.49***	2.74
Procedural justice	0.56	0.05	12.08***	2.82	0.45	0.07	6.22***	2.79	0.45	0.06	8.03***	2.94
Police effectiveness	0.04	0.03	1.19	1.38	0.16	0.05	3.37***	1.34	0.11	0.04	2.89**	1.49
Legal cynicism	-0.02	0.03	-0.62	1.14	-0.01	0.04	-0.14	1.12	0.04	0.04	1.13	1.07
Relations with police officers	0.09	0.03	2.91**	1.43	0.15	0.05	2.84**	1.49	0.17	0.05	3.15**	1.70
Gender (male)	-0.02	0.05	-0.83	1.02	-0.09	0.07	-2.29*	1.08	-0.05	0.06	-1.64	1.05
Age	0.02	0.00	0.63	1.15	0.03	0.00	0.59	1.22	0.01	0.00	0.32	1.19
Education (high school and lower)	-0.01	0.05	-0.52	1.11	-0.01	0.07	-0.13	1.05	-0.01	0.06	-0.37	1.02
F	149.73***				65.75***				86.30***			
R <sup>2</sup> (adjusted)					72.3%				70.6%			
n	476				224				322			

**Note(s):** \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . s.e. – robust standard error

**Source(s):** Table by the authors

to obey and perceptions of police effectiveness in tackling crime and assisting people influence police legitimacy with residents in suburban areas. Finally, women perceive the legitimacy of police more positively than men. Overall, the model explained 72.3% of the variance in perception of police legitimacy of residents sampled.

Police legitimacy in urban areas was influenced by (1) obligation to obey ( $\beta = 0.08$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), (2) trust in police ( $\beta = 0.22$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), (3) procedural justice ( $\beta = 0.45$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), (4) police effectiveness ( $\beta = 0.11$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and (5) relations with police officers ( $\beta = 0.17$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Once again, procedural justice had the greatest impact on residents' perceptions of police legitimacy, followed by trust in police, and relations with police officers. Similar to residents of suburban areas, feelings of obligation to obey and police effectiveness influence perceived police legitimacy by residents in urban areas. Overall, the model explained 70.6% of the variance in perception of police legitimacy of residents sampled.

In Table 4, the results of discriminant analysis are presented, with which we conducted a multivariate test of differences between residents' perceptions of police legitimacy living in rural, suburban or urban areas. Wilks' Lambda (0.96;  $p < 0.001$ ) revealed statistically significant differences between rural, suburban and urban residents. Results emphasised that the following variables affect differentiation between groups: police legitimacy ( $F = 4.36$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), obligation to obey ( $F = 4.70$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), trust in police ( $F = 4.63$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), procedural justice ( $F = 4.33$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), police effectiveness ( $F = 5.12$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and legal cynicism ( $F = 7.92$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). A comparison of residents in rural, suburban and urban areas shows that residents of suburban areas perceive police officers' fairness in procedures involving them more positively than residents in rural and urban areas. In contrast, residents of rural areas perceive police legitimacy and their effectiveness more positively than residents of suburban and urban areas. They also expressed the greatest trust in police and feelings of obligation to obey authorities, but also the greatest level of legal cynicism. It seems that the conservatism and local cohesion (and closedness) in rural areas/communities affect individuals' respect and willingness to obey lawful authorities while simultaneously causing a cynical perception of the established rules in society. Classification of residents' responses shows that 47.8% of originally grouped respondents were correctly classified.

## Discussion

Police legitimacy became an important topic of criminological research when Tom Tyler published his book *Why People Obey the Law*. While police legitimacy (and legitimacy of policing) was the subject of numerous theoretical discussions (e.g. Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012; Bradford *et al.*, 2013; Tyler, 2006) and empirical studies (e.g. Hinds and Murphy, 2007; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003), the number of studies in non-Western, specifically former socialist

	Rural		Suburban		Urban		Wilks' Lambda	F	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Police legitimacy	3.39	0.90	3.35	0.91	3.21	0.94	0.99	4.36*	
Obligation to obey	3.00	1.03	2.88	1.07	2.77	1.07	0.99	4.70**	
Trust in police	3.35	0.86	3.24	0.92	3.16	0.91	0.99	4.63**	
Procedural justice	3.41	0.84	3.44	0.81	3.26	0.84	0.99	4.33*	
Police effectiveness	3.94	0.69	3.89	0.63	3.77	0.72	0.99	5.12**	
Legal cynicism	2.67	0.99	2.61	0.97	2.39	0.98	0.99	7.92***	
Relations with police officers	2.97	0.91	2.93	0.93	2.86	0.94	0.99	0.91	
Wilks' Lambda								0.96***	

Note(s):  $n = 1,022$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Source(s): Table by the authors

**Table 4.** Discriminant analysis: Police legitimacy in rural, suburban and urban areas

cultural environments is limited (e.g. [Meško et al., 2012](#); [Sun et al., 2017](#); [Tankebe, 2009](#)). The present study contributes to the existing knowledge in the following ways: (1) it is the first study of police legitimacy in a former socialist country, based on a national sample of citizens, which provides a test for the generalisation of concepts of legitimacy, and its correlates in a different cultural setting, and (2) the effect of the settings on variables influencing residents' perceptions of police legitimacy is tested.

The results of the statistical analyses highlighted the variables: obligation to obey, trust in police, procedural justice, police effectiveness, and relations with police officers, as correlates of residents' perceptions of police legitimacy in Slovenia. Similar to the findings of other studies ([Hinds and Murphy, 2007](#); [Sunshine and Tyler, 2003](#)), the role of procedural justice must be acknowledged as the variable with the strongest influence on citizens' perceptions of police legitimacy in Slovenia. Individuals who perceive police officers' conduct as fair and respectful, regardless of the outcome, will acknowledge the legitimacy of their authority ([Tyler, 2006](#)). Trust in authority influences citizens' normative compliance with laws expressed as the obligation to obey the authority, as they perceive police officers as the legitimate power holders in a society ([Bradford et al., 2013](#); [Tyler and Fagan, 2008](#)). If the police wish to achieve instrumental compliance of citizens with the laws, they must effectively fight and suppress crime ([Sunshine and Tyler, 2003](#)). As [Tyler and Fagan \(2008\)](#) argued, high police legitimacy is associated with lower crime rates. Put differently, the effectiveness of police officers in combating crime and helping citizens reflects their competence and justification of the position of a power holder in citizens' eyes. Contrary, the ineffectiveness or rather lack of effectiveness of the police weakens citizens' belief that police officers are on their "side" and that they share the same values ([Bradford et al., 2014](#)). Good relations between police officers and citizens are crucial in the process of achieving police legitimacy. [Tyler \(1997\)](#) argued that the legitimacy of police depends on the individual's motivation to enter into relations with police officers based on the assessment of their conduct and behaviour. At the same time, based on the quality of relations, trust is developed between police officers and citizens, influencing the latter's willingness to cooperate with the police ([Hawdon et al., 2003](#)). The results reveal two significant findings. First, police legitimacy in Slovenia is predominately influenced by procedural fairness, which is in contrast to [most] other studies in non-western countries (e.g. [Sun et al., 2017](#); [Tankebe, 2009](#)) where police effectiveness is the strongest correlate. In a [more] democratic environment, where police legitimacy rests on public consent, fair procedures in policing are essential. It can be assumed that the level of democracy affects the shift from police "effectiveness" to "fairness" as an essential element in residents' perception of police legitimacy, supporting [Bottoms and Tankebe's \(2021\)](#) argument on the effect of social context. Second, based on the research findings, a question of the suitability of Western models (especially the Tyler model) for testing legitimacy concepts in a former-socialist (i.e. Slovenian) environment arises again. [Reisig and Meško \(2009\)](#) argued that Tyler's model is unsuitable for measuring legitimacy in the Slovenian prison environment, which was later confirmed by [Hacin and Meško \(2020\)](#). In this study, the operationalisation of factors included variables from the Tylerian scale and those used by [Tankebe in Ghana \(2008, 2009\)](#) and [Meško et al. \(2012\)](#) in Slovenia. While certain concepts were operationalised, as in the above-mentioned studies, others needed modification. Moreover, additional factors were introduced (i.e. relations with police officers). Acknowledging that "traditional" factors influence residents' perception of legitimacy, it also has to be emphasised that residents-police officers relations had an impact on police legitimacy. Whether this is the consequence solely of the specifics of the Slovenian environment (smallness of the area and familiarity of the residents) or wider phenomena characteristic of other former socialist countries still needs to be explored. However, it can be assumed that established models of police legitimacy need certain modifications to be fully suited to the cultural context of former socialist countries.

Following [Meško and Hacin's \(2023\)](#) example, the impact of residents' settings on their perceptions of police legitimacy was tested. Perceived police legitimacy was the highest among residents of rural areas, and it can be assumed that the small size of rural communities influences the intensiveness of relations with police officers based on fairness that enhances their trust in authorities. The nature of relations between police officers and residents of rural areas is more intense and personal, as they usually know each other ([Meško and Hacin, 2023](#); [Weisheit et al., 1994](#)). A similar situation can be observed in suburban and urban areas, as small towns are characteristic of Slovenia (population exceeds 100,000 inhabitants only in the capital). Nevertheless, police legitimacy, as well as trust in police, declines with the level of urbanisation. In contrast to rural areas, police effectiveness influences residents' perceptions of police officers in urban and suburban areas. It can be assumed that due to the unfamiliarity with individual police officers [on a personal level] in more urbanised areas, residents, besides fair treatment, expect effectiveness in dealing with crime, and safety and security problems in order to acknowledge the legitimacy of police officers. It can be argued that differences in the perceptions of police legitimacy by residents of rural, suburban, and urban areas exist but are not profound. The recognition of the legitimacy of a power-holder is based on fair treatment, leading to the formulation of relations between holders of authority and its recipients that may develop into trust between them. It appears that this triad is characteristic of the Slovenian environment, as it influences not only citizens' perceptions of police legitimacy but also the audience's perception of the legitimacy of power-holders in other environments (e.g. prison environment; [Hacin and Meško, 2020](#)). The results highlight two important findings. First, in contrast to [Schaap and Saarikkomäki's \(2022\)](#) assumption that the perception of police legitimacy in rural areas, due to isolation, is probably worse in comparison to towns and cities, police legitimacy was perceived more positively in rural areas. Besides the familiarity between residents and police officers in villages, the specific context of Slovenian rural areas (that is presumably relevant to other rural areas of small developed countries; further research is needed) should be emphasised, as these are not isolated communities, but vibrant and fully integrated communities, where residents due to short distances daily commute to urban areas and had the same access to services (including police services) as residents in towns and cities. Second, it seems that the invariance hypothesis ([Brown and Resig, 2019](#)) can be partly confirmed (in relation to ecological context) within different Slovenian settings but not between countries. The results showed that differences in perception of police legitimacy are not profound between Slovenian areas, which confirms the stability of police legitimacy in different ecological contexts, while differences by comparing Slovenian results with other studies were significant. It can be concluded that the invariance hypothesis can be applied within the specific context of an individual country, but, as a comparison of results to other studies suggests, factors influencing legitimacy vary significantly between different social contexts ([Bottoms and Tankebe, 2021](#)).

### *Limitations*

The study is not without limitations. First, there is a possibility of a response bias due to the cross-sectional data gathering, capturing residents' views at a single point in time. The nature of legitimacy is unstable over time, so a longitudinal study should be implemented in the future, which would compare police legitimacy and variables influencing residents' perceptions of the legitimacy of police officers in different time periods and settings. Second, the possibility that residents gave socially desirable answers in the process of surveying due to fear of disclosure, should be mentioned. To avoid such behaviour, researchers ensured confidentiality and anonymity prior to surveying. Third, the characteristics of the sample can be perceived as a limitation, as they only partially reflect

the attributes of the overall population. Consequently, the results should be generalised with some caution. Future studies should address this problem with careful sampling to ensure a proportional representation of all groups. Finally, quantitative research may not be sufficient to address complex correlations between various variables and police legitimacy, and differences between residents' perceptions of police legitimacy in rural, suburban and urban areas. Future research should combine quantitative (surveying) and qualitative methods (for example, structured interviews) that would allow an in-depth understanding of the complex nature of police legitimacy and its correlates, as well as, revealing detailed distinctions between residents' perception of police legitimacy in urban, suburban and rural contexts that cannot be identified by using solely quantitative methods.

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Supplementary material

Variable	FL	Rural			Suburban			Urban					
		M	SD	Median	Mode	M	SD	Median	Mode	M	SD	Median	Mode
<i>Police legitimacy</i> ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ; KMO = 0.84; var. = 74.86%)													
The police in my community are trustworthy	0.84	3.43	0.99	3	3	3.34	1.03	3	4	3.26	0.99	3	3
The police can be trusted to make decisions that are right for your community	0.91	4.43	0.97	3	3	3.40	0.99	3	3	3.21	1.03	3	3
I am proud of the police in this community	0.88	4.43	1.03	3	3	3.31	0.98	3	3	3.11	1.03	3	3
I have confidence in the police	0.82	3.40	1.05	3	4	3.36	1.02	3	4	3.28	1.11	3	4
<i>Obligation to obey</i> ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ; KMO = 0.66; var. = 62.67%)													
You should accept police decisions even if you think they are wrong	0.76	2.97	1.14	3	3	2.78	1.19	3	3	2.73	1.20	3	3
You should do what the police tell you to do even if you disagree	0.95	3.02	1.20	3	3	2.91	1.23	3	3	2.76	1.22	3	3
People like me have no choice but to obey the directives of the police	0.63	2.99	1.27	3	4	2.95	1.27	3	3	2.84	1.29	3	3
<i>Trust in police</i> ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ; KMO = 0.79; var. = 63.62%)													
The police act in ways that are consistent with my own moral values	0.75	3.37	0.97	3	3	3.31	0.97	3	3	3.30	1.04	3	3
When the police deal with people, they always behave according to the law	0.88	3.37	1.04	3	4	3.21	1.08	3	3	3.17	1.06	3	3
The police always obey the law	0.82	3.26	1.09	3	3	3.19	1.14	3	3	3.02	1.12	3	3
If I were to talk to police officers in my community, I would find their values to be very similar to my own	0.73	3.42	0.93	3	3	3.24	1.07	3	3	3.15	0.99	3	3
<i>Procedural justice</i> ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ; KMO = 0.95; var. = 66.81%)													
The police treat citizens with respect	0.80	3.40	0.95	3	3	3.40	0.94	3	4	3.21	1.03	3	3
The police respect citizens' rights	0.85	3.49	0.96	4	3	3.46	0.96	3	3	3.27	1.03	3	3
The police treat people fairly	0.86	3.39	1.01	3	3	3.40	0.94	3	4	3.19	1.01	3	3

(continued)

Table A1. Variables included in the factor analysis

Table A1.

Variable	FL	Rural			Suburban			Urban					
		M	SD	Median	Mode	M	SD	Median	Mode	M	SD	Median	Mode
The police are courteous to citizens they come into contact with.	0.82	3.47	0.98	4	4	3.49	0.91	4	4	3.40	0.99	3	3
The police take time to listen to people	0.83	3.26	1.05	3	3	3.33	0.99	3	3	3.16	1.02	3	3
The police make decisions to handle problems fairly	0.87	3.37	0.97	3	3	3.42	0.89	3	3	3.19	0.99	3	3
The police treat everyone with dignity	0.85	3.38	0.98	3	3	3.43	0.91	3	4	3.27	0.98	3	3
The police follow through on their decisions and promises they make	0.76	3.25	0.99	3	3	3.29	0.97	3	3	3.12	0.96	3	3
The police explain their decisions to the people they deal with	0.70	3.33	0.99	3	3	3.41	0.98	3	3	3.21	0.97	3	3
<i>Police effectiveness</i> ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ; $KMO = 0.83$ ; var. = 44.01 %)													
The police are doing a good job preventing crime in my neighbourhood	0.52	3.44	0.93	3	4	3.38	0.93	3	3	3.25	0.94	3	3
The police do a good job maintaining order in my neighbourhood	0.55	3.45	0.97	3	3	3.48	0.93	3	3	3.33	0.93	3	3
The police are always ready to provide satisfactory assistance to victims of crime	0.48	3.42	0.97	3	3	3.48	0.99	3	3	3.31	0.96	3	3
The police are doing well in controlling violent crime	0.45	3.34	0.96	3	3	3.40	1.01	3	3	3.20	0.96	3	3
When I am walking around my neighbourhood at night, I feel safe	0.75	4.03	1.04	4	5	3.81	0.97	4	4	3.69	1.18	4	4
I feel safe in my neighbourhood	0.81	4.17	0.95	4	5	4.04	0.92	4	4	3.89	1.07	4	4
I feel safe when I am at home	0.74	4.33	0.89	5	5	4.24	0.82	4	5	4.19	0.98	4	5
I feel safe shopping in my neighbourhood	0.76	4.19	0.98	4	5	4.26	0.83	4	5	4.18	0.96	4	5
I feel safe when I spend my free time (e.g. sports activities) in my neighbourhood	0.77	4.29	0.92	5	5	4.31	0.84	5	5	4.24	0.94	4	5

(continued)

Variable	FL	Rural			Suburban			Urban					
		M	SD	Median	Mode	M	SD	Median	Mode	M	SD	Median	Mode
<i>Legal cynicism</i> ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ; KMO = 0.75; var. = 42.21%)													
To make money, there are no right or wrong ways anymore, only easy ways and hard ways	0.64	2.89	1.31	3	3	2.88	1.37	3	3	2.57	1.24	3	3
Nowadays a person has to live pretty much for today and let tomorrow take care of itself	0.73	2.75	1.38	3	3	2.64	1.38	3	1	2.43	1.25	2	1
Laws were made to be broken	0.66	2.13	1.26	2	1	2.08	1.32	1	1	1.93	1.15	1	1
It is okay to do anything you want as long as you don't hurt anyone	0.55	3.00	1.40	3	4	2.88	1.35	3	3	2.69	1.38	3	1
<i>Relations with police</i> ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ; KMO = 0.64; var. = 66.89%)													
Most citizens have a positive opinion of the police	0.92	2.88	1.05	3	3	2.88	1.07	3	3	2.76	1.13	3	3
Most citizens have a positive opinion about the work of the police	0.94	2.86	1.04	3	3	2.82	1.02	3	3	2.79	1.04	3	3
Police officers are rightly trusted by the majority of citizens	0.54	3.30	0.97	3	3	3.22	0.99	3	3	3.13	0.99	3	3

**Note(s):**  $n = 1,022$ ; Principal axis factoring, rotation Varimax; FL-factor loadings; M-mean; SD-standard deviation. Scale ranging from 1 – Strongly disagree to 5 – Strongly agree

**Source(s):** Table by the authors

Table A1.