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Research Article

Children of Police Officers: Adaptation, Anxiety and Family Support in the Context of Police Work

Dzieci funkcjonariuszy Policji: adaptacja, lęk i wsparcie rodzinne w kontekście służby policyjnej

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Abstract

The article examines the functioning and experiences of children of police officers in relation to their perceptions of their parent's police service, adjustment to parental absence and irregular work schedules, anxiety about the parent's safety, and family support. A mixed-methods design combined surveys of 300 police officers and 300 wives of police officers, 20 semi-structured interviews with police officers, a focus group with five experts in psychology and psychotherapy, and five case studies of police families. Quantitative analyses included response distributions and Spearman's rank correlations ($p \leq 0.05$), while qualitative material was analysed thematically and integrated through triangulation. In both survey groups, approximately half of respondents reported that children frequently had to adjust to parental absence. Among police officers, 40.0% reported frequent anxiety among their children associated with service-related risks, while 40.0% of wives indicated that their children frequently asked about their father's safety. Age-appropriate conversations about police work were reported by 58.7% of wives and 54.7% of officers. Greater service-related demands were associated with increased anxiety among children from both perspectives ($\rho = 0.23$; $p < 0.01$ and $\rho = 0.28$; $p < 0.001$). Qualitative findings suggest that pride and the perceived social value of police work may coexist with uncertainty, heightened vigilance, and peer pressure. Predictable routines, age-appropriate communication, and the emotional stability of the other caregiver emerged as potentially important protective resources. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings provided support for all three research hypotheses, with the strongest quantitative evidence relating to adaptation and anxiety, while the role of family communication and support was primarily informed by qualitative findings.

Keywords

police family, children of police officers, police work, child adaptation, child anxiety, family support, parental occupational stress, work–family conflict, child well-being

Abstrakt

Artykuł analizuje funkcjonowanie i doświadczenia dzieci funkcjonariuszy Policji w odniesieniu do postrzegania służby rodzica, adaptacji do jego nieobecności i nieregularnego grafiku pracy, lęku o jego bezpieczeństwo oraz wsparcia rodzinnego. Zastosowano podejście mieszane, łącząc badania ankietowe 300 policjantów i 300 żon funkcjonariuszy, 20 częściowo ustrukturyzowanych wywiadów z policjantami, zogniskowany wywiad grupowy z pięcioma specjalistami z zakresu psychologii i psychoterapii oraz pięć studiów przypadków rodzin policyjnych. Analiza ilościowa obejmowała rozkłady odpowiedzi i korelacje rang Spearmana ($p \leq 0,05$), a materiał jakościowy analizowano tematycznie i integrowano w ramach triangulacji. W obu grupach około połowy respondentów wskazywało na częste dostosowywanie się dzieci do nieobecności rodzica. Wśród funkcjonariuszy 40,0% zgłaszało częsty niepokój u dzieci związany z zagrożeniami wynikającymi ze służby, natomiast 40,0% żon wskazywało, że ich dzieci często pytały o bezpieczeństwo ojca. Rozmowy o pracy policjanta dostosowane do wieku dziecka deklarowało 58,7% żon i 54,7% funkcjonariuszy. Większe obciążenie służbą pozostawało związane z nasileniem niepokoju dzieci w obu perspektywach ($p = 0,23$; $p < 0,01$ oraz $p = 0,28$; $p < 0,001$). Materiał jakościowy wskazuje, że duma i społeczne znaczenie zawodu mogą współistnieć z niepewnością, wzmożoną czujnością i presją rówieśniczą. Przewidywalne rytuały, komunikacja dostosowana do wieku oraz stabilność emocjonalna drugiego opiekuna wyłoniły się jako potencjalnie ważne zasoby ochronne. Łączna interpretacja wyników ilościowych i jakościowych dostarczyła argumentów wspierających wszystkie trzy hipotezy badawcze, przy czym najsilniejsze dowody ilościowe dotyczyły adaptacji i lęku, natomiast znaczenie komunikacji i wsparcia rodzinnego zostało rozpoznane przede wszystkim na podstawie wyników jakościowych.

Słowa kluczowe

rodzina policyjna, dzieci funkcjonariuszy Policji, praca w Policji, adaptacja dzieci, lęk u dzieci, wsparcie rodzinne, stres zawodowy rodzica, konflikt praca–rodzina, dobrostan dziecka

Introduction

Families of police officers live in an environment where one parent's professional duties significantly affect daily home life. Police service requires officers to be available for duty and work shifts, to respond to unpredictable situations, make decisions under pressure, deal with aggression and face risks to their health or lives. These aspects of the job affect the organisation of family time, the division of household responsibilities, the ability to make plans together, and the parent's emotional availability upon returning from duty. In a police family, the boundary between the professional and family life can become blurred, as the tension, fatigue, and aftereffects of police interventions do not remain confined to the workplace. Research on the work-family interface suggests that the spillover between professional and domestic roles can intensify conflict between them, particularly when a job requires a high degree of availability and limits the predictability of private life (Glavin and Schieman 2012, 71–98).

Policing is a profession characterised by persistent and multidimensional occupational stress. It involves psychological strain, responsibility for decision-making, exposure to crisis situations, the need for

rapid responses, working in hazardous conditions, and difficulties in separating professional and family roles. Research on occupational stress in policing highlights the significance of both organisational stressors and those inherent in police service, including time pressure, shift work, workplace relationships, and tensions between professional and private life (Violanti et al. 2017, 642–656; Gibbons 2024, 348–357). For the family, this means having to continually adapt to the parent's work schedule, as the parent may not always be able to attend important events at home, at school or within the family. Children experience these limitations directly, even if they cannot always articulate the reasons behind them.

In a police family, children learn about their parent's profession through everyday experiences such as the parent's absence from home, night shifts, sudden call-outs, fatigue after duty, conversations between adults, the sight of a uniform, signs of tension, and the concern shown by the other caregiver. A parent's work can be a source of pride, a sense of security, and the belief that the parent performs a socially valuable role. It can also give rise to anxiety when leading to cancelled plans, parent's emotional withdrawal after difficult interventions, or the child's fear for the parent's safety. Children's understanding of their family situation depends on their age, emotional development, communication within the family and the stability of their relationships with loved ones. Developmental psychology emphasises that children interpret events through the lens of their current cognitive capabilities and the quality of their relationships with adults. Consequently, the same work-related situation may be experienced differently by a younger child than by an adolescent (Harwas-Napierała and Trempała 2008; Brzezińska et al. 2021).

In this context, the role of the family as a support system is fundamental. Social support includes knowing that loved ones are available, having opportunities to talk, feeling that one's emotions are accepted, receiving information and practical assistance, as well as maintaining a predictable daily routine. Theories of social support emphasise that the mere belief that help is available can enhance a sense of security and reduce perceived stress (Bavik et al. 2020, 726–758; Schwarzer and Knoll 2007). For the children of police officers, the way in which parents explain their absences, fatigue, or tension related to their service is of particular importance. Excessive silence may leave children to form their own assumptions, while providing overly detailed accounts of difficult events may impose a burden that exceeds the child's developmental capacity. The most protective approach involves calm communication that is age-appropriate and consistently reaffirms the child's emotional security.

This article aims to analyse the functioning and experiences of children of police officers with regard

to their perceptions of their parent's profession, their adaptation to the demands of police service, and the role of family support. The study focuses on selected aspects of how children function within a police family, including the consequences of a parent's absence and irregular work schedule, the children's emotional reactions, the strategies they use to adapt to the parent's work patterns, and the support mechanisms within the family. The central research question was formulated as follows: How does the specific nature of a parent's police service relate to children's perceptions of that profession, their adaptation, and the significance of family support? Three specific research questions have been formulated:

- RQ1. How do the children of police officers perceive their parent's profession and its significance for family life?
- RQ2. What emotional and organisational difficulties do children experience in relation to a parent's absence, irregular work schedules, and the inherent risks of police service?
- RQ3. What role do family communication, the stability provided by the other parent, and broader family support play in children's adaptation to the specific nature of a parent's police service?

Three research hypotheses were formulated:

- H1. Children of police officers hold an ambivalent view of their parent's profession: they see it as a source of pride, responsibility, and prestige, while simultaneously viewing it as a factor that limits the predictability of family life.
- H2. The irregular rhythm of police work, night shifts, a parent's absence, and awareness of the risks involved are associated with the development of adaptive strategies in children, as well as increased anxiety regarding the parent's safety.
- H3. Open communication, the emotional stability from the other caregiver, and the availability of family support serve a protective function in the children's adaptation process and foster a better understanding of the family situation.

The analysis examined the organisational characteristics and demands of the parent's police service, including irregular schedules, night shifts, absence from home, changes to plans, exposure to risk, and post-shift tension. These were examined in relation to various dimensions of children's functioning, including their perception of the parent's profession, adaptive behaviours, anxiety about the parent's safety, reactions to the parent's absence, and family communication and support. In the quantitative part of the study, the analysis was based on the frequency of responses relating to these phenomena. The qualitative analysis focused on the recurring themes such as self-reliance, vigilance, suppression of personal needs, family rituals, ways of explaining the nature of police service, and the role of the other caregiver.

The study integrates quantitative and qualitative data. Two survey samples comprising 300 police officers and 300 wives of police officers were supplemented by 20 in-depth interviews with police officers, a focus group interview with five experts, and five case studies of police families. The analysis of the survey

data employed Spearman's rank correlation coefficient, with a significance level of $p \leq 0.05$. Findings from these various sources were subsequently compared through triangulation.

Children's functioning reveals an aspect of life in police families that is often less visible than the professional stress experienced by police officers or the burdens placed on the other caregiver. A parent's police service manifests itself in everyday life through the rhythm of the household, cancelled plans, waiting for the parent's return home, the way in which danger is discussed, and the quality of the emotional presence of family members. Recognising these experiences can help in designing support that is better aligned with the actual needs of police families, such as supportive psychoeducation, family counselling, and communication workshops.

1. A Child in a Police Family – Family Environment, Values and Perceptions of a Parent's Profession

A police family constitutes a distinctive environment for child development and upbringing, in which family bonds, everyday emotional relationships, and the organisation of domestic life are closely connected with the demands and consequences of one parent's police service. This distinctiveness stems from the nature of police work, characterised by the requirement to be available for duty, shift work, exposure to danger, the hierarchical structure of the police force, readiness to respond at short notice, and the close connection between professional duties and public responsibility. A child growing up in such a household experiences family life as being shaped by events beyond the private sphere. Daily schedules, a parent's presence, opportunities to spend time together, the atmosphere of family conversations and the division of household responsibilities may all depend on duty shifts, police interventions, a parent's return from a difficult shift, or the need to maintain professional discretion.

The family remains the primary environment for socialisation, upbringing, the transmission of norms, and the learning of social roles (Szlendak 2011, 95–126). In a police family, these processes acquire a distinct dynamic, as children internalise norms and values in an environment shaped by duty, service, responsibility, and the need to adapt family life to professional demands. This involves more than the organisation of time. A parent's profession becomes part of the everyday meanings that the child reads from adults' behaviour, the way they talk about work, their reactions to a parent's absence, family rituals and tensions arising during periods of fatigue. A parent's police service thus becomes embedded in everyday family life and, consequently, in the process of upbringing.

A police family can provide stability when, despite one parent's irregular working hours, it maintains

predictability, a sense of closeness and a consistent daily routine. Children need repeated signals of safety, including parents' emotional availability, clear rules, calm explanations and the presence of adults willing to listen to their questions. These elements contribute to a sense of security, development of emotional bonds and understanding of the social world. Developmental psychology indicates that children interpret reality through the lens of their age, level of emotional maturity, relationships with caregivers and the patterns observed at home (Harwas-Napierała and Trempała 2008, 47–78). A parent's police service is perceived differently by a preschool child, a primary school pupil and an adolescent, who begins to understand the risks, responsibilities and public perceptions of the profession.

The values present within police families are an important element of this environment. Qualities such as responsibility, loyalty, discipline, willingness to help, respect for rules, composure and a sense of service can strengthen a child's moral development. In this context, a parent's work is perceived as an activity of social value, involving protection of others and subordination of personal comfort to the common good. In the homes of police officers, these values are not so much conveyed through explicit declarations as demonstrated through actions such as punctuality, honouring commitments, discretion regarding professional matters, willingness to leave home despite fatigue and acceptance of difficult or unpredictable responsibilities. The transmission of these values can help foster a sense of responsibility, independence and respect for a parent's work.

However, an ethos of service should be integrated into family life with care so that it does not overshadow a child's everyday needs. Patience, setting aside one's own expectations and adapting to adults' responsibilities may come to be seen by a child as a natural part of everyday family life. While this can sometimes lead to greater maturity and independence, in some cases, it may result in a child taking on emotional responsibilities too early. Children of police officers may learn rather early on that parents do not always have control over their presence at home, that shared plans may depend on the demands of police service, and that conversations after a parent's return from work may have to be postponed. While such an understanding helps children make sense of their circumstances, it can also reinforce the belief that their own needs should take second place to the demands of the parent's profession.

How these experiences are processed depends on the family atmosphere. A home in which the nature of police work is discussed calmly and in an age-appropriate manner makes it easier for children to cope with difficult emotions. Knowing that a parent is working a night shift has a different emotional impact from

witnessing sudden anxiety or silence among adults, or overhearing fragments of conversations that leave children to form their own ideas and speculate about what is happening. Children often understand more than adults assume, although their understanding may be incomplete and influenced by imagination. The sight of a uniform, a weapon, a patrol car, a work phone, conversations about police interventions or media reports about threats may reinforce the belief that a parent's work is important, demanding and associated with risk. Without calm explanations from adults, such signals can easily become a source of tension.

Children's perceptions of their parent's profession develop gradually. In early childhood, the image of a parent as a brave, capable person who is needed by others often prevails. A uniform can inspire pride, and a parent's presence at school, state or local ceremonies can strengthen the child's sense of being special. As children grow older, however, they begin to recognise the more complex implications of police service, such as a parent's fatigue, irregular working hours, withdrawal after a difficult day, restrictions on discussing work, physical danger or social tensions surrounding the police. At this stage, a sense of pride may begin to coexist with disappointment, anger or anxiety. Making sense of such emotions is part of a child's development, and the family is the first environment in which children learn to recognise and name them.

In police families, emotional norms also play an important role. Police work requires composure, control over one's reactions, resilience to stress and the ability to act under pressure. Children observe these traits in their parents and may regard them as a model of strength. This model supports development when accompanied by open communication, empathy and acceptance of difficult emotions. However, it becomes a burden when children receive the message that it is better not to express fear, sadness or longing. In families of uniformed service personnel, emotional suppression can easily be mistaken for resilience, while a reluctance to express personal needs may be interpreted as emotional composure. Children's development requires a balance between learning self-control and recognising that anxiety about a parent's safety or sadness over their absence are understandable reactions (Chirkowska-Smolak 2008).

The school and peer environments introduce additional dimensions to these experiences. Children of police officers may encounter varied reactions, such as interest, admiration, jokes, criticism or oversimplified opinions about the police force. In such situations, a parent's profession ceases to be a purely private family matter and becomes part of the child's social identity. Pride in a parent can strengthen a sense of belonging and self-confidence, while negative comments may give rise to shame, a desire to defend the parent or a tendency to distance oneself from the subject of police service. The child then learns to distinguish between

their parent as an individual and society's judgements about the police force. This requires emotional maturity and support from adults. The family can help children understand that police work is subject to public judgement, but that this does not diminish their right to a positive relationship with their parent.

Irregular schedules, night shifts, and unexpected duties affect everyday family rituals, including shared meals, family outings, help with schoolwork, attendance at school events, and time spent together during holidays and weekends. Children often learn to be flexible, however, this flexibility should not lead to a permanent loss of predictability. Family rituals can be established despite shift work, provided they are not rigidly tied to a specific time or day. What matters is the regularity of everyday gestures: a conversation upon the parent's return home, breakfast together after a night shift, a phone call before bedtime, a brief explanation when plans are cancelled or agreeing on another time for the planned activity. Such small, everyday practices help children understand that a parent's absence stems from professional obligations rather than a lack of interest in the family.

Children in police families learn about their parent's work through recurring aspects of everyday family life: shifts marked on a calendar, conversations around the table, waiting for a parent to return home, fatigue evident in the parent's gestures, rescheduled plans, brief explanations, silence after a difficult shift, and the presence of the other caregiver, who helps the child make sense of these experiences. Through these small, everyday situations, children develop a perception of police work as a profession that is closely connected to family life, demanding and emotionally significant within the family.

2. Adaptation, Anxiety and Support among Children of Police Officers: Findings from the Author's Research

2.1. Methodological Assumptions and Characteristics of the Research Material

The study was conducted among police families in the Masovian, Świętokrzyskie, Łódź, and Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeships, using purposive sampling. The survey component included 300 active-duty police officers and 300 wives of police officers. Eligibility required living in the same household and having at least one child. Among the police officers, the largest age groups were 31–40 years (41.0%) and 41–50 years (32.3%); the corresponding figures for the wives were 45.0% and 28.3%, respectively. The most frequently represented service branches were preventive service (40.0%), followed by criminal service (22.3%) and investigative service (18.0%). The qualitative material consisted of 20 individual in-depth

interviews with police officers, a focus group interview with five experts in psychology and psychotherapy, and five case studies of police families.

The surveys provided data on the frequency of phenomena and the relationships between them, while the interviews and case studies offered a deeper understanding of how families experience and adapt to the parent's police service. The qualitative material was organised into thematic categories to identify recurring patterns of experience. Quantitative analyses involved examining response distributions and calculating Spearman's rank correlation coefficients (ρ), with a significance threshold of $p \leq 0.05$. The evaluation of the research hypotheses was based on the convergence of findings from various sources and, in the case of quantifiable relationships, the results of correlation analysis.

Children did not constitute a separate survey sample. Their experiences were examined indirectly, primarily through parental reports, expert perspectives, and observations collected during family case studies. During family meetings, children could also participate in voluntary, informal conversations in the presence of at least one parent. Consequently, the findings reflect adults' perceptions and interpretations of children's experiences, supplemented by qualitative observations, rather than direct, systematically collected self-reports from children. This distinction should be taken into account when interpreting the results, particularly those concerning children's anxiety, adaptation, and perceptions of their parent's profession.

Table 1. Structure of the empirical data used in the study.

The table summarises five components of the mixed-methods study: surveys of 300 police officers and 300 officers' wives, 20 individual interviews with police officers, a focus group with five experts, and five police-family case studies. For each component, it identifies the sample size, data collection method, research instrument, and scope of analysis.

Research Component	Sample	Data Collection Method	Research Instrument	Scope of Analysis
Survey of Police Officers	N = 300	Questionnaire-based interview	Researcher-developed questionnaire	Comparison of perceptions of adaptation, anxiety, communication and service-related demands.
Survey of Police Officers' Wives	N = 300	Questionnaire-based interview	Researcher-developed questionnaire	Primary quantitative data on children's adaptation, anxiety, communication and needs.
In-depth Interviews with Police Officers	N = 20	Individual semi-structured interviews	Interview guide, audio recorder	Context of post-duty stress and emotional availability to children.
Expert Component	N = 5 experts	Focus group interview	Expert interview guide, audio recorder	Interpretation of adaptation, anxiety and family support mechanisms.
Case Studies of Police Families	N = 5 families	Case studies, conversations and observation	Case study guide	Differences in children's experiences according to age, environment and police work patterns.

Source: Own elaboration.

2.2. The Family Perspective - Survey Results

Among the 300 wives of officers, the largest group consisted of mothers with two children (118; 39.3%), followed by those with one child (103; 34.3%), three children (56; 18.7%), and four or more children (23; 7.7%). The burden of night shifts was common in this sample: the husbands of 104 respondents (34.7%) worked 4–6 night shifts per month, while the husbands of another 75 (25.0%) worked 7 or more. Against this backdrop, responses concerning children indicate a combination of adaptation and emotional costs. A total of 149 women (49.7%) reported that their children frequently or very frequently had to adjust to their father's absence. Tension or anxiety while the father was on duty, particularly at night or on weekends, was reported by 106 respondents (35.3%), while 120 (40.0%) reported that their children frequently or very frequently asked about their father's safety. At the same time, 176 women (58.7%) reported having conversations about police service adapted to their children's age and circumstances. The responses provided by the officers themselves present a very similar profile, even though the questions in the two questionnaires were not always phrased identically. A total of 151 police officers (50.3%) reported that their children frequently or very frequently had to adjust to absences related to their service. Age-appropriate conversations about police service were reported by 164 respondents (54.7%), while 162 (54.0%) believed that their children understood the difficulties and unpredictability of police work. A total of 120 officers (40.0%) observed frequent anxiety among their children related to the risks of police service, while 109 (36.3%) reported that police service frequently affected their children's emotions. The two perspectives show a clear convergence: families' practical adaptation to police work schedules does not preclude tension, vigilance or concern about the parent's safety.

Correlation analysis confirmed that the intensity of work-related demands was associated with both children's emotional reactions and the initiation of family communication. Among the wives, greater work-related demands observed in their husbands were positively correlated with children's anxiety while their fathers were on duty ($\rho = 0.23$; $p < 0.01$), while higher demands were positively correlated with more frequent conversations with children about police service ($\rho = 0.16$; $p < 0.05$). Among the police officers, similar relationships were somewhat stronger: the intensity of occupational stressors was positively correlated with children's anxiety ($\rho = 0.28$; $p < 0.001$) and with officers' assessments of the impact of police service on their children's emotions ($\rho = 0.25$; $p < 0.001$). As work-related demands increased, officers also reported more frequent conversations aimed at explaining the situation and helping children make sense of it ($\rho = 0.17$; $p =$

0.004). The results from both samples therefore follow a similar pattern: greater work-related demands are associated with more frequent signs of anxiety and a greater impact of police service on children's emotions, while families are more likely to engage in conversations as a way of making sense of the situation.

Table 2. Selected Indicators of Children's Functioning in the Survey Data.

The table compares survey findings from 300 police officers and 300 officers' wives concerning children's adaptation to parental absence, family communication, anxiety, and emotional reactions. Approximately half of respondents in both groups reported frequent adaptation to parental absence, while the correlation results indicate positive associations between work-related demands and children's anxiety and explanatory family conversations.

Area	Perspective of Police Officers' Wives (N = 300)	Perspective of Police Officers (N = 300)	Interpretation
Adaptation to a parent's absence	149 respondents; 49.7% — often/very often	151 respondents; 50.3% — often/very often	Adaptation is a common feature of everyday family life.
Age-appropriate communication about police service	176 respondents; 58.7% — rather yes/definitely yes	164 respondents; 54.7% — affirmative responses	Conversation is a widely used strategy for maintaining stability.
Anxiety concerning a parent's safety	120 respondents; 40.0% — frequent/very frequent questions about safety	120 respondents; 40.0% — frequent anxiety related to the risks of police service	Anxiety affects a substantial proportion of families.
Emotional reactions during or as a result of police service	106 respondents; 35.3% — frequent/very frequent tension while the father is on duty	109 respondents; 36.3% — frequent impact of police service on children's emotions	Emotional costs coexist with adaptation.
Work-related demands and children's anxiety	$\rho = 0.23$; $p < 0.01$	$\rho = 0.28$; $p < 0.001$	Greater work-related demands are associated with increased anxiety.
Work-related demands and explanatory conversations	$\rho = 0.16$; $p < 0.05$	$\rho = 0.17$; $p = 0.004$	Greater work-related demands are associated with more frequent explanatory conversations, which may serve as a family adaptation strategy.

Source: Own elaboration.

A parent's profession also affects children's functioning outside the home. Among the wives surveyed, 90 respondents (30.0%) indicated that the father's work frequently or very frequently affected their children's relationships with peers through comments, questions or teasing. In interviews and case studies, the social visibility of the profession had both positive and negative implications: on the one hand, it fostered pride in the parent's work and a sense of its importance; on the other, it exposed children to labelling or identification with the police as an institution. This was particularly evident in a case study of a family living in a small community, where the teenage children encountered both respect for their father's profession and teasing or attempts to attribute their father's professional role to them. Adaptation therefore involves coping not only with a parent's absence and changing family routines, but also with the social significance of the parent's profession as attributed to the child.

2.3. Expert Perspectives and a Qualitative Account of Children's Functioning

In the accounts provided by psychologists and psychotherapists, a recurring theme was the ambivalent nature of children's experiences. Pride in a parent's work and a belief in its social significance coexisted with anxiety, tension and a need to monitor signs of potential danger. The strategies described included adapting to a parent's absence, becoming more independent, observing the parent's emotional state and rationalising the specific nature of police service. Younger children more frequently asked specific questions about when the parent would return and whether they were safe. Older children were sometimes inclined to minimise their own problems so as not to burden adults, or demanded more attention following periods of absence. Similar mechanisms emerged in in-depth interviews with police officers, who described persistent, heightened arousal after duty, a need for quiet and periods of reduced emotional availability to family members.

Specialists sometimes identified an emotional cost behind children's apparent maturity. Increased responsibility may be accompanied by suppression of anxiety and personal needs. Accordingly, calm, age-appropriate explanations, predictable safety rituals, opportunities to ask questions and a clear distinction between the officer's fatigue and their relationship with the child were identified as protective factors. When anxiety became pronounced, particularly in the presence of sleep disturbances, somatic symptoms or difficulties at school, the potential benefits of family consultations or individual support for the child were highlighted.

The diversity of family responses is well illustrated by the case studies. In a family with young children and frequent night shifts, simple explanations of the father's absence and regular daily routines helped maintain stability. A different picture emerged in a family with teenagers living in a small community, where the social costs associated with the visibility of the father's profession were more pronounced: teasing by peers, the need to control information and the need to distinguish their own identity from their father's professional role. In the case of an officer working at least seven night shifts per month, however, the high level of work-related demands did not undermine the children's sense of security. This was supported by predictable routines, clear communication about the parent's fatigue, planned opportunities to reconnect and an accessible support network. These cases do not constitute evidence of a causal relationship, but they demonstrate that similar exposure to the demands of police service may be associated with different family experiences, depending on the quality of communication, the stability provided by the other caregiver and the predictability of everyday rules.

Table 3. Main Qualitative Categories Relating to Children's Functioning in Police Families.

The table presents six qualitative categories identified through the expert focus group and police-family case studies: adaptation and independence, anxiety and heightened vigilance, communication and rituals, the role of the other caregiver, peer environment, and support needs. It compares the findings from both qualitative sources and explains their significance for understanding children's experiences in police families.

Category	Findings from the Expert Focus Group	Findings from Case Studies	Interpretive Significance
Adaptation and independence	Adjusting to a parent's absence, greater independence, limiting one's own needs	Taking on minor responsibilities, flexible expectations regarding a parent's availability	A developmental resource may coexist with hidden strain.
Anxiety and heightened vigilance	Questions about safety, observing subtle signs of tension, concern about a parent's return	Tension during night shifts, reactions to a parent's emotional withdrawal	The risks of police service become part of a child's sense of security.
Communication and rituals	Brief, age-appropriate conversations, rituals of departure and return	Simple explanations, regular routines and predictable opportunities to reconnect	Predictable routines may help reduce uncertainty and support children in making sense of a parent's absence.
Role of the other caregiver	Helping to stabilise emotions without assuming the role of a therapist	Organising daily life, explaining a parent's fatigue, alleviating tension	A protective resource, provided the caregiver does not become overwhelmed.
Peer environment	Older children's need to distinguish their parent as an individual from perceptions of the police as an institution	Teasing, labelling, strategies of withdrawal, irony or confrontation	The social visibility of the profession may increase the emotional costs of adaptation.
Support needs	Psychoeducation, family consultations, support for heightened anxiety	Flexible consultations, support for communication and parenting	Support should include the police officer, their partner and children.

Source: Own elaboration.

2.4. Synthesis of Results and Hypothesis Verification

The evaluation of the research hypotheses was based not on a single indicator but on the convergence of findings from different sources. Ambivalent perceptions of the parent's profession were assessed primarily on the basis of recurring qualitative themes, considered alongside survey-based indicators of the social and emotional costs of police service. The hypothesis concerning adaptation and anxiety could be evaluated more directly through quantitative analysis, as data were available on both response frequencies and correlations between work-related demands and children's reactions. Assessing the protective role of communication and the stability provided by the other caregiver, however, required combining data on the prevalence of age-appropriate conversations with explanatory insights drawn from the expert focus group and case studies. This approach made it possible to distinguish between the strength of the observed association and the interpretation of the underlying mechanism.

Table 4. Empirical Basis for the Verification of Research Hypotheses.

The table summarises the quantitative indicators, qualitative evidence, and evaluation of three research hypotheses. The findings support all three hypotheses, with the strongest quantitative evidence concerning

the coexistence of adaptation and anxiety (H2), while ambivalent perceptions of the parent's profession (H1) and the potential protective role of family communication and support (H3) are supported primarily by qualitative evidence and triangulation.

Hypothesis	Indicators / Quantitative Data	Qualitative Evidence	Verification Outcome
Research hypothesis H1 – ambivalent perceptions of the parent's profession	30.0% of wives reported that the father's profession frequently or very frequently affected their children's peer relationships; 54.0% of police officers believed that their children understood the difficulties and unpredictability of police work.	The expert focus group and case studies described the coexistence of pride, the perceived social significance of police service, anxiety, absence and social visibility.	The findings support H1 through triangulation of quantitative and qualitative evidence. Positive perceptions of the profession were documented primarily through qualitative findings.
Research hypothesis H2 – adaptation coexisting with anxiety	Adaptation: 49.7% of wives and 50.3% of police officers; concerns about the father's safety: 40.0% of wives reported frequent questions from their children; anxiety: 40.0% of police officers reported frequent anxiety among their children; work-related demands and anxiety: wives $\rho = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$; police officers $\rho = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$; work-related demands and children's emotions: $\rho = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$.	Independence, rationalisation of absence, vigilance, questions about safety and suppression of personal needs.	The findings provide substantial support for H2, based on consistent results from both survey samples, statistically significant correlations, and complementary qualitative evidence.
Research hypothesis H3 – the protective role of communication, caregiver stability and support	Age-appropriate conversations: 58.7% of wives and 54.7% of police officers; work-related demands and conversations: wives $\rho = 0.16$, $p < 0.05$; police officers $\rho = 0.17$, $p = 0.004$.	Calm explanations, rituals, the stabilising role of the other caregiver and predictable opportunities to reconnect.	The findings support H3 primarily through qualitative evidence and triangulation. Correlations indicated more frequent communication under greater work-related demands, while qualitative findings suggested its potential protective role.

Source: Own elaboration.

Triangulation of evidence from different sources provided support for the first research hypothesis (H1), particularly through qualitative findings concerning the coexistence of positive and negative perceptions of the parent's profession. In the survey, 30.0% of wives indicated that the father's profession frequently or very frequently affected their children's relationships with peers, while 54.0% of police officers believed that their children understood the difficulties and unpredictability of police work. The surveys documented the social and cognitive dimensions of this experience, while its positive aspects were most evident in the expert focus group and case studies, where pride, a sense of the social significance of police service and respect for the parent's professional role were recurring themes. The same material also revealed anxiety, parental absence, cancelled plans and social labelling. The overall findings are consistent with the assumption that the parent's profession is perceived ambivalently.

The second research hypothesis (H2) received substantial support from the quantitative evidence, complemented by consistent qualitative findings. A total of 49.7% of wives and 50.3% of police officers reported that their children frequently or very frequently had to adapt to the parent's absence. Among wives, 40.0% reported that their children frequently or very frequently asked about their father's safety, while 40.0%

of police officers reported frequent anxiety among their children. Among the wives, a greater burden related to the police service was associated with higher levels of anxiety in the children ($\rho = 0.23$; $p < 0.01$). Among police officers, the intensity of occupational stressors was correlated with children's anxiety ($\rho = 0.28$; $p < 0.001$) and with the impact of police service on their emotions ($\rho = 0.25$; $p < 0.001$). In the focus group interview and case studies, the same pattern was reflected in greater independence, rationalising the parent's absence, heightened vigilance and questions about safety. The consistency between the findings from both survey samples and the qualitative evidence supports this conclusion.

Data on family communication and support resources provided evidence consistent with the third research hypothesis (H3), particularly through qualitative findings suggesting the potential protective role of communication, caregiver stability, and predictable family routines. Age-appropriate conversations about police service were reported by 58.7% of wives and 54.7% of police officers. Such conversations were more frequent when work-related demands were greater, according to both wives ($\rho = 0.16$; $p < 0.05$) and police officers ($\rho = 0.17$; $p = 0.004$), suggesting that communication is used as an adaptation strategy under conditions of increased tension. However, the correlation alone does not establish that such conversations have a protective effect. This mechanism was evident in the findings from the expert focus group and case studies, where calm explanations, the stability provided by the other caregiver, daily routines and predictable opportunities to reconnect with the officer reduced uncertainty and helped children make sense of the parent's absence. The evaluation of the hypothesis was therefore not based on causal inferences drawn from correlational data.

The surveys, expert focus group and case studies together present a coherent picture. Adaptation and anxiety are not mutually exclusive: some children adapt effectively to the demands and routines of a parent's police service while simultaneously experiencing anxiety or reacting to increased work-related demands on the parent. The qualitative evidence helps explain why these experiences can coexist. Independence may indicate the development of competences, but it may also involve suppressing one's own needs; pride does not eliminate concerns about a parent's safety, and the effectiveness of family rituals depends on the resources available to the adults. The final evaluation of the research hypotheses is based on the convergence of these findings rather than on any single indicator.

Conclusion

A child's experience of growing up in a police family has organisational, emotional and social dimensions. Responses from wives and police officers, considered alongside the qualitative evidence, indicate the coexistence of two processes: children learn to adapt to the routines of their parent's police service, while some also experience anxiety, heightened vigilance or difficulties arising from the social visibility of the profession.

The findings support the first research hypothesis (H1), primarily through qualitative evidence considered alongside survey results concerning the social and emotional costs of police service. Pride in a parent's profession and a sense of its social significance may coexist with limited predictability in family life, anxiety, and the need to deal with judgements from others. The second research hypothesis (H2) received the strongest quantitative support. Consistent findings from both survey samples and statistically significant correlations indicate that adaptation to a parent's absence may coexist with more pronounced emotional responses as work-related demands increase. Children's independence and flexibility should therefore be regarded as potential adaptive resources that do not necessarily indicate an absence of psychological costs. The findings also support the third research hypothesis (H3), particularly through qualitative evidence suggesting the potential protective role of family communication, the stability provided by the other caregiver, and predictable family rituals. The correlations indicate that explanatory conversations are reported more frequently under conditions of greater work-related demands, while qualitative accounts suggest that calm explanations and consistent daily routines may help reduce children's uncertainty. These interpretations acknowledge the limitations of correlational data and do not establish causal relationships.

The findings therefore do not indicate a simple relationship in which successful adaptation precludes anxiety. Adaptation to a parent's absence may coexist with emotional costs, while the significance of protective family resources becomes apparent primarily in how the family manages the uncertainty associated with police service.

Interpreting these findings requires consideration of the study's limitations. Participants were selected purposively from families in four voivodeships, and the children did not constitute an independent survey sample. Their functioning was assessed primarily through parental reports, evidence from the expert focus group and case studies. Furthermore, correlations do not establish causation. The value of the study lies in the consistency of findings obtained from several sources and the opportunity to relate quantitative patterns to

mechanisms observed in the everyday lives of families.

The aim of the article was achieved by examining perceptions of the parent's profession, children's adaptation strategies, their emotional responses and family support resources. The findings support the provision of age-appropriate psychoeducation, family consultations, strengthened communication and assistance following events that undermine family members' sense of security. The aim of such support is not to remove awareness of the risks inherent in police service from children's minds, but to place those risks within understandable boundaries and maintain predictable relationships with adults.

Statements

Funding:

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Institutional Review Board / Ethics Statement:

The author confirms that the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles applicable to studies involving human participants, including the protection of privacy, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the rights of minors. The author declares that all ethical requirements applicable to the study were fulfilled and accepts responsibility for compliance with these requirements.

Informed Consent Statement:

The author confirms that participation in the study was voluntary and that informed consent was obtained from all research participants in accordance with applicable ethical requirements. The author further confirms that the participation of minors, where applicable, was conducted with appropriate parental or legal guardian consent and with due regard for the children's rights and well-being. The author accepts responsibility for compliance with these requirements.

Data Availability Statement:

The author confirms that the research data were collected and processed in accordance with applicable ethical and data protection requirements. Due to the personal and potentially sensitive nature of the information concerning police officers and their families, including minors, access to the underlying research data is restricted to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality. The author accepts responsibility for the appropriate management, storage, and protection of the research data.

AI Tools Declaration:

The author declares that no AI tools requiring disclosure under the Seminare Policy on AI in Scholarly Publishing were used in the preparation of this manuscript or in the underlying research.

Conflicts of Interest:

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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