

Original article

## Violence in the work of military police officers\*

Violência no trabalho de policiais militares

violencia en el trabajo de policías militares

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### Abstract

**Objective:** to evaluate violence in the work of military police officers. **Method:** a quantitative, cross-sectional study carried out with 111 military police officers from a municipality in Santa Catarina, Brazil. Data collection used a socio-occupational questionnaire and Survey Questionnaire Workplace Violence. Data were analyzed with descriptive and inferential statistics. **Results:** verbal aggression was the most frequent, followed by physical violence, bullying and sexual harassment. Racial harassment did not emerge. Physical violence was associated with years of work ( $p=0.017$ ); verbal aggression with age ( $p=0.028$ ) and years of work ( $p=0.003$ ), bullying/moral harassment with degree of job satisfaction ( $p=0.016$ ), level of recognition for the work performed ( $p=0.048$ ) and level of interpersonal relationship ( $p=0.016$ ). There was concern about violence and the lack of registration of violence. **Conclusion:** the violence at work of police officers requires better coping, awareness and labor protection actions.

**Descriptors:** Workplace Violence; Occupational Health; Police; Public Health; Surveillance of the Workers Health

### Resumo

**Objetivo:** avaliar a violência no trabalho de policiais militares. **Método:** estudo quantitativo, transversal, realizado com 111 policiais militares de um município de Santa Catarina, Brasil. A coleta de dados utilizou questionário sociolaboral e *Survey Questionnaire Workplace Violence*. Os dados foram analisados por meio de estatística descritiva e inferencial. **Resultados:** a agressão verbal foi a mais frequente, seguida da violência física, do assédio moral e do assédio sexual. O assédio racial não emergiu. A violência física associou-se aos anos de trabalho ( $p=0,017$ ); a agressão verbal com idade ( $p=0,028$ ) e anos de trabalho ( $p=0,003$ ), a intimidação/assédio moral com grau de satisfação com o trabalho ( $p=0,016$ ), nível de

reconhecimento pelo trabalho realizado ( $p=0,048$ ) e nível de relacionamento interpessoal ( $p=0,016$ ). Evidenciou-se preocupação com a violência e a falta de registro das violências. **Conclusão:** a violência no trabalho dos policiais requer melhor enfrentamento, sensibilização e ações de proteção laboral.

**Descritores:** Violência no Trabalho; Saúde Ocupacional; Polícia; Saúde Pública; Vigilância em Saúde do Trabalhador

## Resumen

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**Objetivo:** evaluar la violencia en el trabajo de policías militares. **Método:** estudio cuantitativo, transversal, realizado con 111 policías militares de un municipio de Santa Catarina, Brasil. Para la recolección de datos se utilizó un cuestionario socio-laboral y *Survey Questionnaire Workplace Violence*. Los datos fueron analizados mediante estadística descriptiva e inferencial. **Resultados:** la agresión verbal fue la más frecuente, seguida de la violencia física, el acoso moral y el acoso sexual. El acoso racial no surgió. La violencia física se asoció con los años de trabajo ( $p=0,017$ ); agresión verbal con edad ( $p=0,028$ ) y años de trabajo ( $p=0,003$ ), intimidación/acoso moral con grado de satisfacción con el trabajo ( $p=0,016$ ), nivel de reconocimiento por el trabajo realizado ( $p=0,048$ ) y nivel de relaciones interpersonales ( $p=0,016$ ). Hubo evidencia de preocupación por la violencia y la falta de registro de la violencia. **Conclusión:** la violencia en el trabajo entre agentes policiales requiere de mejores acciones de enfrentamiento, sensibilización y protección laboral.

**Descritores:** Violencia Laboral; Salud Laboral; Policía; Salud pública; Vigilancia de la Salud del Trabajador

## Introduction

Workplace violence is considered a public health problem worldwide.<sup>1</sup> According to the World Health Organization (WHO), violence at work is characterized by the intentional use of physical force or threat, which results or may result in injury, death or harm. In addition, violence can be classified as physical and psychological, the second subdivided into verbal aggression, bullying, sexual harassment and racial discrimination.<sup>2</sup> The International Labor Organization (ILO) conceptualizes the phenomenon as unacceptable behaviors and practices that occur only once or repeatedly and cause physical, psychological and sexual harm to a worker or group of workers.<sup>3</sup>

Estimates show that each year, on mean, one million people lose their lives or suffer as a result of injuries resulting from interpersonal and collective aggression and even self-harm.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, violence, in its most varied forms, is a problem that currently challenges the State and makes the population hostage to a situation<sup>5</sup> for which there are few coping devices in the field of public policies. Also, in this social scenario, the military police officer stands out, who is considered a professional who is strongly susceptible to suffering and experiencing episodes of violence at work.<sup>6</sup>

In relation to their work activities, the military police officers make ostensible and preventive rounds to maintain safety and public order, a condition that, consequently, makes this professional usually the first to arrive at the place of the infraction, theft or violent occurrences.<sup>7</sup> At this time, their function involves adopting measures to control the situation, being exposed to numerous risks, including the occurrence of physical violence and psychological violence (verbal aggression, intimidation/bullying, sexual harassment and racial harassment).<sup>8</sup>

Studies<sup>9-10</sup> emphasize the importance of the theme also considering the role of these workers in public safety, which is exposed in the work process to real and also symbolic violence. For many workers, not meeting institutional, social or family demands is synonymous with failure, increasing frustrations and self-blame, thus reducing the sense of accomplishment and favoring physical and psychological illnesses.<sup>9</sup> In this context, the lack of recognition of society is the main factor related to stress at work.<sup>10</sup>

With the demographic growth and consequent increase in criminalization, acting in the military police is considered one of the most dangerous professions in Brazil.<sup>11</sup> As a reflection of this, these workers are vulnerable to different situations of violence.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the situational diagnosis is essential for the prevention of the phenomenon, as well as the promotion of a safer and healthier work environment.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the objective was to evaluate violence in the work of military police officers.

## Method

A quantitative, described, cross-sectional study was carried out in a Military Police Battalion located in the West of Santa Catarina, Brazil. It was based on the guidelines of the Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE).

The participants were military police officers, being used as an inclusion criterion to act as a military police officer, in the operational and/or administrative services, for at least 12 months. Professionals on leave for any reason during the data collection period were excluded.

In the data collection, from August to October 2021, 206 military police officers were assigned to the scenario of interest, considering a confidence interval of 95% and a sampling error of 6%. The sample consisted of 111 participants. The statistical guidelines of the number of workers in the category and representativeness were included to achieve reliability in the

results. The police officers were approached during the shift change by invitation, acceptance and prior scheduling.

In a private location, participants answered a socio-occupational questionnaire containing: sex; age; skin color; have a partner; tobacco use; alcohol use; chronic diseases; use of controlled medications; mean hours of sleep; time of experience in the military police field; and hold an enlisted personnel or officer position. Furthermore, the Workplace Violence Survey Questionnaire proposed by the ILO and Public Services and International Nursing Council was applied,<sup>2</sup> translated into Portuguese.<sup>14</sup> This questionnaire includes 29 questions, which addresses general data and the occurrence of physical and psychological violence (verbal aggression, psychological harassment, sexual harassment and racial discrimination) in the last 12 months.<sup>14</sup> For each type of violence, questions were asked about who the aggressors were, the victim's reactions and the problems experienced.

After data collection, the data were entered into the Epi Info 7.0 software, version windows, and later analyzed in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software, version 21.0. Quantitative variables were described using measures of central tendency. Categorical variables were presented in absolute and relative frequencies. In addition, association analyses were carried out with the help of Pearson's chi-square test, relating the types of violence and the socio-occupational characteristics of military police officers.

The research respected the ethical aspects according to Resolution number 466/2012, - 510/2016 - 580/2018, of the Ministry of Health, being evaluated and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Community University of the Region of Chapecó under opinion 4,918,501, on August 19, 2021.

## Results

The study included 111 military police officers, 85.8% male, with a mean age of 36.5 years ( $\pm$  6.8 years), ranging from 26 to 57 years, white (75.2%), married (59.5%) and with one to two children (59.6%). In addition, 6.3% were smokers, 77.5% drank alcohol, 30.6% had some chronic disease and 27.9% used some daily medication (Table 1).

**Table 1** – Profile of military police officers in the municipality of Western Santa Catarina, 2021 (n= 111)

Variables	n	%
Sex (n=106)		
Male	91	85.8
Female	15	14.2
Age (n=108)		
Under 31 years	17	15.7
From 31 to 40 years	59	54.6
From 41 to 50 years	31	28.7
Over 50 years	1	0.9
Race (n=109)		
White	82	75.2
Black	2	1.8
Brown	25	22.9
Marital status		
Married	66	59.5
Single/Separated/Divorced	45	40.5
Number of children (n=104)		
None	35	33.7
One to two children	62	59.6
More than two children	7	6.7
Smoking		
Yes	7	6.3
No	104	93.7
Intake of alcoholic beverage		
Yes	86	77.5
No	25	22.5
Has any chronic disease		
Yes	34	30.6
No	77	69.4
Makes use of any continuous use medication		
Yes	31	27.9
No	80	72.1

Regarding the labor characteristics of military police officers, it is noteworthy that 97.3% worked in the enlisted personnel function, that is, working on the streets and in overt policing and in order preservation activities and 35.1% were 6 to 10 years in this profession. In addition, 70% had a high level of job satisfaction, 49.5% of institutional recognition and 76.4% positively evaluated the relationship with the work team (Table 2).

**Table 2** – Labor characteristics of the military police officers in the municipality of Western Santa Catarina

Variables	n	%
Years working as a military police officer		
1-5 years	18	16.2
6 to 10 years	39	35.1
11 to 20 years	23	20.7
Over 20 years	31	27.9
Role in the institution		
Enlisted personnel	108	97.3
Officer	3	2.7
Degree of job satisfaction (n=110)		
Low	8	7.3
Moderate	25	22.7
High	<b>77</b>	70
Level of recognition for work done/institutional (n=109)		
Low	26	23.8
Moderate	29	26.6
High	54	49.5
Level of interpersonal relationships at work (n=110)		
Low	7	6.4
Moderate	19	17.3
High	84	76.4

Regarding the general aspects related to violence in the workplace, military police officers showed a high level of concern about violence (40%) and highlighted that they have frequent physical contact with the victims in the occurrences (51.4%).

Regarding reporting violence in the workplace, 75% of military police officers reported that there are procedures recommended by the institution so that, if a military police officer suffers any type of violence, he or she can file a police report. However, 67.3% of participants indicated that they are not encouraged to report violence.

When evaluating the types of violence, military police officers reported that in the last 12 months they have suffered physical violence (30.6%) and psychological violence, such as verbal aggression (41.4%), bullying/psychological harassment (24.3%) and sexual harassment (5.4%). Racial harassment did not emerge among participants.

Among the problems experienced in relation to physical violence, the military police officers pointed out that 35.5% felt little bothered about the disturbing memories, thoughts or images of the aggression; 32.3% felt moderately bothered to think or talk about the aggression; 35.5% felt extremely bothered, as they were alert, vigilant, and constantly tense after the

aggression. In addition, 29.0% of them expressed a feeling that their activities became painful.

Military police officers who suffered verbal aggression (n=46) in some situations ended up not reporting it, with 43.5% not considering it important, 13.0% did not know who to report it to and 10.9% considered it anyway no action would be taken. The same happened with the report of intimidation/psychological harassment, in which 25.9% did not consider it important; 7.4% felt embarrassed; 3.7% felt guilty; 14.8% did not know who to report to; 11.1% were afraid of negative consequences; and 11.1% considered that no action would be taken in any case.

When relating the profile and work characteristics of military police officers with the types of violence, a significant association was identified between physical violence and years of work as a military police officer ( $p=0.017$ ); psychological violence: verbal aggression with age ( $p=0.028$ ) and years of work as a military police officer ( $p=0.003$ ); psychological violence: bullying/psychological harassment with a degree of job satisfaction ( $p=0.016$ ), level of recognition for the work performed ( $p=0.048$ ) and level of interpersonal relationship at work ( $p=0.016$ ). Sexual harassment was not significantly associated with the profile and work characteristics of military police officers.

## Discussion

Through this study, it was observed that military police officers are mostly male, aged 31 to 40, married, self-identified as white, with one or two children and who drink alcohol, and that the majority of the public investigated are police officers who act as enlisted personnel.

Professionals who work in the enlisted personnel function have the principle of acting in the operational service, that is, maintaining public order in accordance with the law, while officers are responsible for internal work, specifically in the management of the institution.<sup>15</sup> The military police officer defined as an enlisted personnel, as a result of the service he performs, is exposed to the most varied types of violence that, when prolonged, can trigger occupational diseases.<sup>16</sup>

Research resumes that, with the growth of criminalization, the military police officers have reached an unfavorable situation, in which their daily exposure increases the risk of loss of life. In response to this scenario, they become vulnerable to comorbidities associated with stress, physical dysfunctions, and mental disorders.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, research shows that excessive working hours, daily stress, night work under severe stress, high physical effort, and

exposure to climatic variations result in physical disorders such as fatigue, sinusitis, muscle pain, and insomnia.<sup>9</sup>

With regard to lifestyle habits, the prevalence of alcohol consumption was observed among this class. As the use of this substance becomes recurrent, the individual begins to develop tolerance to its effects, such as loss of reflex and memory, since there is an adaptation of the Central Nervous System and the body.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the use of alcohol can compromise motor coordination and impair judgment, as well as incur balance deficit and tremors among other effects that its prolonged use can cause.<sup>18</sup> Such effects can have serious consequences on the work of the military police officer, on his family and also on society.<sup>19</sup> This also reveals a tendency to take measures to confront only individual problems at work.

The research showed that, in the last 12 months, 30.6% of police officers were victims of physical violence in the workplace, 41.4% suffered verbal aggression, 24.3% psychological harassment/intimidation and 5.4% sexual harassment. The findings reinforce that society has been suffering a growing increase in violence. As for physical violence, in 2021 alone, 198 police officers were murdered during work or even during their off hours.<sup>20</sup> Also, according to the Brazilian Yearbook of Public Safety, deaths are related to intentional homicide, robbery, automobile accidents and bodily injury followed by death.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the risk of physical violence or injury is also a factor that greatly increases stress. This type of violence and bodily injury can also occur during immobilization, persecution and overcoming obstacles.<sup>10</sup>

In relation to psychological violence, as it is difficult to identify and prove, it is often naturalized and trivialized. However, this causes negative impacts on the mental and physical health of workers.<sup>21</sup> Data indicate that, in 2022, the increase in suicide among police officers was 55.4% compared to the previous year, totaling 121 more victims,<sup>20</sup> thus reinforcing the importance of discussing the mental health of these workers and their working conditions.

In this sense, the research showed that there are numerous physical and psychological problems experienced by professionals after the occurrence of violence. The study showed that 75% of the military police officers reported that there are procedures for reporting violence, however 67.3% of the participants pointed out that they are not encouraged to do so. As a result, it is impossible to identify and produce reports on health problems of military police officers in the country from the information systems of the Ministry of Health, thus making it impossible to build health indicators for these professionals.<sup>22</sup>



Reporting or notification is important, since all violence against a military police officer is considered a crime under the Penal Code.<sup>23</sup> The consequences for perpetrators of violence are detention and/or imprisonment. Detention is applied to lighter convictions, not admitting that the beginning of compliance is in a closed regime, and can be fulfilled in a semi-open regime or the host's house. Arrest is when the suspect is caught in the act of committing a crime or by written and reasoned order of the competent judicial authority, and may begin to serve the sentence in a closed regime.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the need for conduct against the perpetrator, it is essential that institutional measures continuously prepare police officers to face violence and that they receive psychological support and guidance in the face of violent experiences.

Even in the face of the high incidence of different types of violence among military police officers, the research showed that 70% of participants have a high level of job satisfaction. Job satisfaction can be recognized as the positive and/or pleasant emotional state through which the worker feels fulfilled with their daily activities.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, a study shows that the satisfied professional has greater ease to work in a team and presents greater productivity and less physical, psychological and mental exhaustion.<sup>25</sup>

It should be noted that the increase in cases of violence, coupled with the difficulty of identifying its effects and impacts on the working population, has repercussions on the unqualified confrontation of the problem, generating more serious and fatal cases among workers.<sup>26</sup>

The negative consequences of violence on the health of individuals are increasingly frequent in the most varied places, whether intrafamily, community or in the work environment.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, this impacts people's lives, as it affects the context of life and health, and may, when related to work activities, impact the number of absences from the work environment, presenteeism, the impossibility of practicing certain actions due to sequelae or even end up evolving to more serious results.<sup>2</sup>

Violence, in its most varied forms, is a problem that currently challenges the State and makes the population hostage to a situation that finds no space and limits for its occurrence. Workers in the initiative and in the public sector, specifically military police officers, live with this problem on a daily basis, which has numerous consequences.<sup>5</sup>

Often, without fixed work schedules, experiencing daily violent actions and risking their

lives, military police officers are often exposed to factors that can contribute to mental illness, resulting in episodes of stress, anxiety and depressive disorders and, in many cases, in more severe cases, withdrawals from work functions and even suicide.<sup>10,27</sup> From this perspective, it is clear that the withdrawal from the work of military police officers, in most cases, occurs as a result of situations resulting from violence, evolving into physical and psychological problems, causing damage to family and social relationships and other uncomfortable situations.<sup>6</sup>

Through ILO Convention 190/2019, it was recognized that violence and harassment at work violate human rights and threaten equality of opportunity, thus being incompatible with decent work. As violence and harassment in the workplace bring such harm to workers, it is necessary to combat this type of harmful events.<sup>3,28</sup>

Another important fact is that 27% of the participants are of races other than white and 14.2% of them are female. In view of the above, it is essential to seek inclusion strategies, which include issues of gender and race in socio-cultural contexts, as well as prevention and confrontation of violence in the workplace.<sup>29</sup> Violence in the workplace of the military police needs to no longer be considered as typical, frequent and commonplace, for this the phenomenon needs debates, evidence and strategies for action.

Among the limitations of the study, it is impossible to address workers on leave, who may have experiences of violence that would contribute to understanding the topic, in addition to its cross-sectional approach and convenience sampling.

However, this study contributes to a situational diagnosis of the violence experienced by military police officers and broadens the perspective of the cyclical process of violence.

Investigations with other professionals highlight that the analysis of variables that are associated with specific types of violence allows the determination of institutional measures and policies that minimize violent acts.<sup>30</sup> Recognition of the phenomenon can provide efficient ways of preventing and coping, avoiding harmful and irreversible consequences for workers and public safety. Furthermore, this research is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs - number 8.8), which highlight the protection of labor rights and the promotion of safe and protected work environments for all workers.

## Conclusion

The study identified the predominant types of violence among military police officers,

being, respectively, verbal aggression, followed by physical violence, bullying/psychological harassment and sexual violence. These professionals consider these situations as typical, but demonstrate a high level of concern, reporting the absence of encouragement from their superiors to report what happened.

The findings alert to the need to encourage reports and notifications of the violence suffered, thus avoiding the trivialization of these events.

The challenges of the dynamic world, as well as the transformations of work contexts, require reflective and effective alternatives to face labor violence. Databases and/or observatory on the types of violence experienced by these professionals are tools that allow better diagnosis of the problem and monitoring, which can guide strategies and actions of continuous interventions in an intersectoral and multidisciplinary way, as well as institutional measures such as support groups and psychological support to these workers.

Furthermore, the findings contribute as a matter for the development of Occupational Health, in the promotion of health and prevention of violence in the workplace, and for the dissemination of knowledge in these areas.

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