

Perceptions of the importance of the police among rural youth in Colombia and Panama

Percepciones de la importancia de la policía en jóvenes rurales de Colombia y Panamá

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Abstract

Studies on the perceptions of rural youth about the importance of the police represent a relevant milestone for Colombia and Latin America. In this perspective, the present research aims to understand the perceptions of students from Colombia and Panama in relation to the importance of the police from the representation of global thinking. Methodologically, the study is based on an interpretative paradigm, with a qualitative approach and from the methodology of thematic analysis. The data collected through the “3 Why’s” thinking routine from 37 young people from Colombia and 40 from Panama from rural educational institutions were analyzed through matrices and table systems. The results reveal the students’ perceptions of the role of the police in the personal, community and social spheres. At the personal level, they refer to security conditions, crime control and citizen protection. At the community level, they refer to social and corporate protection, conflict resolution and community safety. In the social sphere, they refer to law enforcement, risk management, safe justice and corruption. These perceptions depend on the experiences and aspirations of young people, according to the contexts from which they interact. It is concluded that the voices of rural youth contribute to the reconfiguration of the positive relationship between the police and the community in the search for understanding and citizen cooperation, which constitutes a great advance in the recognition of this population group as social actors in their territories.

Key words: Perception; police; rural youth; high school student.

Resumen

Los estudios de las percepciones de jóvenes rurales acerca de la importancia de la policía representan un hito relevante para Colombia y Latinoamérica. En esta perspectiva, la presente investigación tiene como objetivo comprender las percepciones de estudiantes de Colombia y Panamá con relación a la importancia de la policía desde la representación del pensamiento global. Metodológicamente el estudio se sustenta en un paradigma interpretativo, con un enfoque cualitativo y desde la metodología de análisis temático. Los datos recabados mediante la rutina de pensamiento de “Los 3 Por qué” a los 37 jóvenes de Colombia y a los 40 de Panamá de instituciones educativas rurales fueron analizados a través de matrices y sistemas de tablas. Los resultados revelan las percepciones de los estudiantes frente al rol de la policía en el ámbito personal, comunitario y social. En lo personal, hacen alusión a las condiciones de seguridad, el control de la delincuencia y la protección ciudadana. En lo comunitario, refieren la protección social y corporativa, la resolución de conflictos y la seguridad comunitaria. En lo social abordan el cumplimiento de leyes, la gestión del riesgo, la justicia segura y la corrupción. Estas percepciones dependen de las vivencias y de las aspiraciones de los jóvenes, según los contextos desde los cuales interactúan. Se concluye que las voces de los jóvenes rurales aportan en la reconfiguración de la relación positiva entre la policía y la comunidad en la búsqueda del entendimiento y la cooperación ciudadana, lo cual se constituye en un gran avance en el reconocimiento de este grupo poblacional como actores sociales de sus territorios.

Palabras clave: Percepción; policía; joven rural; estudiante de secundaria.

INTRODUCCIÓN

The relationship between young people and the police has recently been characterized by tensions sparked by international protests. For over 20 years, young people have been at the fore-front of social uprisings around the world (Rivera *et al.*, 2021). These protests can sometimes lead to riots, damage to public property, disruption to public transport and attacks by law enforcement.

In the case of Chile, in the so-called social outburst of October 2019, Rivera *et al.*, (2021) point out that, as in other countries, with the police repression ordered by the government, murders, human rights violations, arrests, eye trauma and deaths were committed. In Colombia, in April 2021 a social outbreak reappeared with large mobilizations, led by young people and very similar to those that occurred in other Latin American countries (Linares & Postigo, 2023), characterized by the use of aggression by the public force (Aguilar-Forero, 2022) and the affectation of the civilian population caused by the demonstrators. In Panama, in July 2022, the difficult economic situation, the rise in the price of food, medicines and fuels fomented social discontent among the Panamanian people (Urribarri, 2023).

Therefore, it is interesting to investigate the perception that young students in other contexts, such as the rural sector, have of the police in two different spaces, the Colombian context where there are allegedly more cases of police abuse and the Panamanian context where there are fewer. In this perspective, a gap in the research found is related to the voices of young students in the rural sector regarding the work of the police in their particular contexts. For this reason, the present research is justified since it allows making their voices visible, from the positive aspects and those to be improved in the youth-police-society relationship. This makes it possible to recognize them as social actors who can contribute to future public policies as managers of better relations between the police and the community. Consequently, the question guiding the research is: What are the conceptions of young rural students in technical secondary education in Colombia and Panama regarding the importance of the police in the personal, social

and global areas? In order to respond to this problem, the general objective was formulated as follows: To understand the perceptions of the importance of the police among students in technical secondary education of a public institution in Colombia and Panama.

In accordance with the aforementioned, this article presents an analysis of the perceptions of a group of rural youth in Colombia and Panama regarding the police, in order to contribute to the recognition and delineation of public policies and programs aimed at improving coexistence among communities. In this way, the document for its analysis is divided into five sections: 1. Theoretical framework, related to the foundation of the functions of the police. 2. Methodology, consisting of the elements that describe the path followed for the development of the research work. 3. Results, composed of the voices of the participants according to the categories and subcategories identified. 4. Discussion, dedicated to the dialogue of the findings of the study with other research, and 5. Conclusions, on the most relevant aspects of the research work, from the objectives set out in the study.

The importance of the work of the police can be approached from the fulfillment of their functions, such as:

Improving safety conditions

As a vigilant function of police responsibility to maintain social order and enforce laws in a secondary manner (Zavaleta *et al.*, 2016) and in cases of public disorder to generate an application of justice according to the infractions and contextual factors. This includes maintaining security conditions to recover public spaces in perspective of control and prevention of disorder, violence or criminal symptomatology, which requires the capacity of the police to be able to provide an effective response to population demands through actions such as prevention, intervention and monitoring of the different modalities of violence (Bonilla & Botero, 2019).

This situation of insecurity in the citizens corresponds to a current and complex problem, evidenced in the high rates of crime, violence, perception of uncertainty in public order and low confidence in institutions (Rodríguez, 2018). It should be noted that this is a complex task given the specific characteristics present in each

country, such as the geographical position and the conditions experienced by the inhabitants, requiring a reengineering of the socio-cultural structure of the communities in order to achieve effective police work.

According to the law, the police are responsible for maintaining public order and promoting peaceful coexistence among citizens (Requena, 2016). In order to effectively reduce risk situations, violent acts, crimes and contraventions in the territories, the work of the police is aimed at actions that have a positive impact on the credibility, legitimacy and trust of the community (Quintero, 2020), consolidating the support of citizens, as the main basis for the fight against crime and any type of violence, the promotion and use of justice as a requirement for the progress of the countries. In relation to young people, the approach based on values such as, "equity, justice and respect for the rights of adolescents, can be an effective measure to improve police procedures involving this population group" (Guibert *et al.*, 2024, p. 16), so as to strengthen the relationship between youth and law enforcement.

Promoting social protection

The work of the police at the local level in terms of social protection is oriented towards an approach to the community, through the actions of the service (Zavaleta *et al.*, 2016), emphasizing public relations with the community, which leads to a decrease in crime and insecurity. Similarly, risk prevention and conflict resolution are generated, guaranteeing security, peace, order and respect for the laws in citizens, valuing procedures with justice more than that of results. This can sometimes lead to the violation or infringement of human rights. For Vasquez (2017) preventing crime in communities helps to detect the way in which the inhabitants assume the problems, requiring support between civic and institutional organizations and the perceptions about security that circulate in social environments.

Social protection at the local level starts with dignified treatment, orderly citizen attention to generate trust and respect for people, which is the basis of legitimacy that, in turn, leads the community to comply with the rules, to collaborate and to respect the police (Requena, 2016). Social protection in the localities is

a cooperative construction among citizen participation, communication spaces and good attention by the police, being important good communication channels and community interaction (Zavaleta *et al.*, 2016) by fostering community strengthening plans with activities in common without exercising power or institutional role. Likewise, it is incumbent upon the police to cooperate to banish corruption from the different social spheres. In this perspective, Bautista (2016) conceives corruption as something totally harmful to the development of communities and which is constantly growing. For this reason, effective interventions are required to combat and control it.

Facilitating conflict resolution and risk management

The work of the police in conflict resolution is based on the responsibility to address situations that may generate any type of violence or social disturbance. This is how the public force promotes the responsibility to protect, reach agreements and consolidate order that guarantees healthy coexistence and people's rights. Conflict resolution carried out by the police adopts community models, facilitating relationships of trust with the community and identifying their needs. Likewise, promoting dialogue, the agreement of commitments and responsibilities that satisfy the interests of those involved, thus building a civic culture with respect for the rules that have been democratically established (Bonilla & Botero, 2019).

In relation to risk management, it is perceived as the intervention, orientation, reduction of risks and threats that may occur in vulnerable populations due to natural phenomena or those induced by human actions. Vulnerability is characterized by intrinsic causes of predisposition to suffer damage to varying degrees by the society. A community or population exhibits a greater degree of vulnerability according to the levels of development and the capacity to modify potential risk factors that may affect it (Cardona, 2008). In this regard, Bonturi (2019) points out as a fundamental purpose the transit of Latin American countries towards social policies with a preventive approach that achieve the articulation between governmental entities, community organizations and police authorities.

METHODOLOGY

Inclusion and selection of participants

The research was carried out in two rural educational institutions: one in Panama and the other in Colombia. The group of young participants from Colombia comes from a rural community in La Palma, a municipality in the department of Cundinamarca. In 2023, the students are in middle-level vocational training at the Institución Educativa Departamental Minipí de Quijano, specializing in agricultural and livestock activities. A total of 37 students participated, 24 women and 13 men, between the ages of 15 and 18. All of them come from families dedicated to agriculture and livestock farming.

The participants from Panama belong to the Abel Tapiero Miranda Professional and Technical Institute of the District of San Lorenzo, located in the province of Chiriquí. This educational institution prepares high school graduates in agriculture and tourism. A total of 40 students participated, 18 women and 22 men between the ages of 17 and 20. They are characterized by being mostly indigenous and some mestizos; they live in rural contexts in the west of the country, their population is in poverty and extreme poverty, with parents with little academic training.

The following criteria were taken into account to select the participants: Students from the rural sector, belonging to educational institutions with training in agriculture and livestock and who were in the last grades of secondary and middle school. In addition, the researchers had easy accessibility to the population with whom the study was developed, due to their institutional role and closeness to the community.

Research Design

The research was developed from an interpretative paradigm, which studies the significance of the actions of human beings and their social dimension, according to changing and diverse realities (Gil *et al.*, 2017). In this perspective, the research work inquired about the perceptions of young rural students regarding the importance

of the police in two different realities (Colombia and Panama), from a qualitative approach. In this approach, the researcher shares scenarios with participants in order to understand the realities of the communities (Acosta, 2023). Consequently, thematic analysis was chosen as the analysis methodology (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020), which aims to describe the information collected in detail rather than formulate theoretical foundations. However, coding establishes the axes for thematic analysis (Fernández de Castro & Ramírez-Ramírez, 2021).

In accordance with the above, the phases of qualitative research (Estrada González *et al.*, 2009; Pérez, 2021) were followed for this research: Preparation, execution (Fieldwork), evaluation (Analytical Moment), and communication. During the preparation, the research process was planned in terms of problem formulation, literature review, and methodological framework. During the execution, the group of young participants was approached to fill out the informed consent form and apply the instrument to collect the information. Subsequently, the evaluation and the analytical moment of the answers given by the students to the questions of the thinking routine “The 3 whys” were developed. Finally, the research report from which the present article was derived was written.

Data collection instrument

To collect the information, the thinking routine “The 3 whys” was used. Thinking routines are strategies that make it possible to visualize how they are understanding a topic. They consist of simple questions or activities structured to develop individual and group thinking. For this research, a thinking routine from the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Project Zero (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2019) was used and its adaptation is presented in Table 1. This adjustment was validated by 5 researchers who are experts in the use of this tool. For this validation, the following parameters were taken into consideration: relevance of the items or questions to the objectives of the study, consistency in the wording, logical sequence and significance or relevance of the information collected:

Table 1.
Structure of the “3 Whys” thinking routine implemented in the investigation

Dimensions	Guiding Question	Procedure
Personal	Why should I care about the work of the police?	1. The “3 Why's” routine was implemented in the Colombian and Panamanian students.
Local	Why should the people around me [family, friends, city, nation] care about the work of the police?	2. All the answers were transcribed in Excel program tables.
Global	Why should the world care about the work of the police?	3. The responses were coded and the categories and subcategories were established. 4. The analysis and theorization processes were carried out.

The table represents the guiding questions of the “The 3 Whys” thinking routine developed with youth from Panama and Colombia, based on Harvard Graduate School of Education (2019).

The “The 3 Why’s” thinking routine was explained with examples to each of the research participants. Subsequently, each one was given in writing the three questions that, from a personal, local and global perspective, inquired about the perceptions of rural youth in relation to the police in specific communities in Colombia and Panama.

Process of information analysis

The qualitative data analysis process was developed with the use of matrices and a table system, within the framework of educational research (Hernández & González, 2020) with the purpose of organizing and retrieving all the responses to the “3 Why” thinking routine of the rural youth participants, through the use of the Excel office application, which was associated with emerg-ing categories and subcategories, giving them colors or response codes as shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1.
Exemplification of color-coded tables for data analysis

A	B	C	D	F	G
Marca temporal	Dirección de correo electrónico	¿Por qué podría importarme la labor de la policía?	Análisis Pregunta 1	Análisis Pregunta 2	Análisis Pregunta 3
J19	xxxxxx	Servir y proteger a la comunidad. Oportunidades de promocionar y enfrentar desafíos diarios. La profesión en los cuerpos y fuerzas de seguridad del Estado ofrecen experiencias gratificantes para quienes las práctica con vocación.	Construcción social-Ética profesional	Control de delincuencia	Mejora las condiciones de seguridad (Gestores de paz)
J32	xxxxxx	La policía está al pendiente de nosotros y de nuestro bienestar. La labor de ellos es difícil porque ese trabajo involucra muchos inconvenientes y siempre están en peligro.	Construcción social - Ética profesional	Protección social	Mejora las condiciones de seguridad (Cumplimiento de normas y leyes)

Note: Example of the analysis using Excel to identify the perceptions and thoughts of the young participants regarding the police.

In this sense, coding appears as the assignment of colors (red, green, blue, brown and orange), which simplify the information for each aspect, allowing the expression of the data in the form of concepts and at the same time the respective

saturation to then select the responses from highest to lowest frequency. In this way, the categories are established, according to the repetition of each aspect, as shown in the example in figure 2:

Figura 2.

Ejemplificación de tablas de codificación por colores para el análisis de la información

Categoría	Frecuencia	Color
Mejora de las condiciones de seguridad	31	
Control de delincuencia	14	
Protección social	12	
Resolución de conflictos	9	
Gestión de riesgos	6	
Construcción social	5	
Ética profesional	5	
Servicio comunitario	3	
Protección de la infancia y adolescencia	3	
Protección de género	2	
Confianza comunitaria	2	
Riesgo social profesional	1	
Cumplimiento de normas y leyes	1	

Note: Example of the analysis of response frequencies after color-coding the responses.

Finally, the process of filtering emerging categories arises from reviewing and organizing those that appear most frequently, which are subjected to a deeper explanation, redefining the central categories and the subcategories described in the following section.

Ethical considerations

The research was socialized to the students and parents, who signed the respective informed consent of the 77 participants from both Colombia and Panamá. Likewise, codes were used to protect the identity of the participants. The research was carried out with own resources, without any type of remuneration.

RESULTS

The following are the personal, local and global connections of Colombian and Panamanian youth in the tenth and eleventh grades of technical high school in 2023 in relation to the importance of the police. Table 2 lists the categories and subcategories derived from the analysis of the voices of the rural students participating in the study:

Table 2.*Categories of the research findings*

Dimensions	Emerging categories in young people in Colombia	Emerging categories in young people in Panama
Personal	- Improved security conditions - Crime control	- Citizen protection
Local	- Social protection - Conflict Resolution	- Community safety - Community protection
Global	- Regulatory and legal compliance - Risk management	- Safe justice - Corruption phenomenon

Source: The table represents the categories derived from the “The 3 Why’s” thinking routine developed with young people from Panama and Colombia.

Table 3 shows the main **voices** that support the research findings regarding the importance given by young people to the police in the personal dimension, when answering the question “Why should I care about the work of the police?”

Table 3.*Importance of the police in the personal dimension*

Dimension	Voices of young Colombians	Voices of young Panamanians
Personal	“The work of the police is important because its main objective is to maintain order and security in society, protecting people and preventing crime. In addition, the police are responsible for enforcing laws and guaranteeing respect for the rights of all citizens” (Colombian Youngster N° 7: J7C).	“I would care because it could help young people against crime, insecurity and injustices that are currently occurring in our country and around the world” (Youngster No. 21 from Panama: J21P).
	“The police are in charge of our security; they are in charge of looking after our welfare, enforcing every law. This allows us to maintain regime and order in the countries. They risk their lives to make us well, making them heroes” (J35C).	“For me the importance of the police is the basis of taking care of and helping people in need and not neglecting their work, because their job is to protect the people of towns and villages in these parts of the country as if it were their first important job” (J34P).

“Police officers are responsible for maintaining security and order in public and private places because they ensure that citizens and their property are protected from danger. They also ensure that Colombians live together in peace” (J35C).

“Police work has as its citizen objective, to be in a safe area, public or private, protecting citizens from dangers and criminal acts² (J5-29P).

“The police control crime in various ways. Crime affects young people, since they are vulnerable to drug use, criminal acts and deaths” (J1C).

“I could care because there are many delinquent people, because many people who have no trade are ending the lives of those who have nothing to do, there are also children involved in vice and others die young” (J1C).

“The work of police officers with citizens and our families is crucial. They protect citizens to ensure peace. The work of the police must be extremely important because it provides protection to our neighbors. It also protects citizens to ensure social peace, improving security conditions. Their presence and action are essential to preventing and combating crime, protecting the community from threats and dangers” (J33-37-39P).

Table 4 shows the main voices that support the research findings regarding the importance given by young people to the police in the local dimension when answering the question “Why should the people around me [family, friends, city, nation] care about the work of the police?”

Table 4.
Importance of the police in the local dimension

Dimension	Voices of young Colombians	Voices of young Panamanians
Local	“The police are the people who keep the country healthy without so many thieves, without the police the country would be bad, no one could live well or in peace, there would be deaths and no one would take justice, but with the work of the police they keep us protected from robberies and deaths. There are many people who kill for fun and thanks to the work of the police we have a healthy life” (J6C).	“The police could matter to the people around me because they will feel protected and remain in a safe country with peaceful citizens. For the nation, the work of the police is fundamental because it curbs drug trafficking. In the constant flow of migrants through Darién, the police provide these migrants with a safe journey when they cross the border from Panama to Colombia” (J1-2-3-4-5P).

“It is important to maintain security and order in society, because they ensure the safety of individuals and the community, and they are also responsible for enforcing and respecting the rights of citizens to ensure the common and social good” (J15C).

“Because they can defend the people in the townships. But sometimes they do nothing when there is an emergency in the town” (J15-16-24P).

“We should care locally, because the police can help us with family problems and with our colleagues, also when it is their turn to patrol, they would be aware of things or problems that may happen in some locality or neighborhood” (J27C).

“They are important because they assume good responsibilities, which provide support to society. For me they are good acts when a police officer protects, safeguards against violence, robberies and other things” (J25-27P).

“The national police are watching over the enforcement of citizens’ rights. They will be at the service of helping in a moment of conflict and danger. They will make sure that all communities will always remain in peace and love, they will be able to walk in confidence and with more tranquility in the streets of the city” (J4C).

“Because it is the one that defends or watches over the security of each country when facing any threat from other countries” (J4-8-9P).

“As it is noticeable in different countries of the world, large quantities of demonstrations are generated, of course, they are within their rights, but not everyone thinks the same, some cause an imbalance in the population, affecting third parties” (J13-21-39P).

Table 5 shows the main voices that support the research findings regarding the importance given by young people to the police in the global dimension when answering the question: Why should the world care about the work of the police?

Table 5.*Importancia de la policía en la dimensión global*

Dimension	Voices of young Colombians	Voices of young Panamanians
Global	“Police officers are in charge of maintaining order in all parts of the country, watching over our rights, taking care of our safety and even risking their lives, all because we have a better future” (J32C).	“Because they would represent a re-lief for society since in this country there is no security, due to crime...” (J30-37P).
	“They protect citizens, homes and families and enforce their rights, because there are bad people who cause problems. They are always everywhere; they are efficient and very helpful” (J5C).	“On many occasions our friends and family members need help when they are in trouble, either because they are being robbed or beaten by a stranger or by their relatives” (J9-14P).
	“It is important to maintain the safety and security of society, as well as to enforce laws. Without it, there would be a greater risk of crime and violence, negatively affecting the lives of people in the world” (J30C).	“Security in Panama is very bad and the work of the police is important because they are very correct, although for some they are not” (J38P).
	“Police work makes life safer with our rights that we as citizens deserve, without them corruption, robberies, death of innocent people, money laundering and other crimes would increase...” (J29C).	“It should matter to the people around us, as it is important to each of them, by providing them with benefits such as ensuring safety, justice, preventing crime and providing services to the community in which each of them resides” (J33-34P).
	“The police ensure that all types of actions that occur around us are complied with and respected, they give us the common good, apart from any inconvenience or problem that arises, they provide a solution as required by law” (J8C).	“Because without the police we would take justice into our own hands, which should not happen, that is what the law is for and the police are there to enforce it” (J11-32P).

“At airports many people carry drugs, and thanks to the police it is possible to prevent them from selling these types of substances that are harmful to young people. Police officers help people who have a plane crash and are asked to search for them” (J16C).

The lack of honesty in many police officers leads them to be corrupt (J40P).

“The police are an important service, they are public servants and helpful in the world, they are always taking care of their community, friends and animals, making sure they are well. They always take care of children, youth, adults, the elderly and animals because we all deserve the same care and respect in any part of the world” (J4C).

“How can we have a level of confidence in police work, given all this dilemma? They are corrupt, they sell out and do not always help, they look for their own pocket” (J15-26P).

“They do not comply with their work rules, they are coimeros” (J28-35P).

When contrasting the findings of both contexts where the study was carried out, it became evident that both Colombian and Panamanian youth coincide in the recognition of the police in the tasks of protection, security and control. Protection is perceived in the social, civic and community dimension. Security is found in the conditions they impose on community life and control, which they recognize in the reduction of crime, in imparting justice and in demanding compliance with the different laws and regulations governing community life. As a difference, the young Panamanians alluded to the phenomenon of corruption in the police institution, while the Colombians did not emphasize this situation; on the contrary, they emphasized the role of the police in the management, prevention and control of risk.

DISCUSSION

The young participants from Colombia consider the police in the local context as a profession with a set of service functions that improve the living conditions of the communities; this social protection is based on ethical and moral principles, legitimacy, non-discrimination and the strengthening of citizen participation. In this sense, the young participants in Colombia per-

ceive the local work of the police as a professional that helps to guarantee a just and peaceful coexistence through authority, patrolling actions and the mediation of social conflicts.

According to the young Colombian participants, among the police actions that characterize risk management at the global level are the prevention of drug trafficking in public places and airports with specialized police for such controls, who review and implement plans locally and internationally to mitigate such illegal actions. The promotion of community care implies an attitude of service, respect and solidarity with the construction of a peaceful and cultural coexistence, prevention and combat of crimes such as kidnapping, robbery and homicide, among others. This action involves permanent and timely surveillance, effective investigation and appropriate sanctions. Likewise, solidarity support in the face of natural disasters, through adequate preparedness and participation in risk management, as well as humanitarian assistance are relevant functions of the police.

Risk management for young participants in Colombia promoted by the national police at a global level is a contribution to the well-being of communities, a concern and desire to improve the quality of life of people, with professional and social commitments and responsibilities, recognizing the community's solidarity participation, in

addition to strengthening the rule of law and the democracy of nations. This is connected to the work of police enforcing rules and laws globally, based on the legal application of codes to maintain order. This requires the classification and punishment of offenses or crimes. Youth participants from Colombia affirm that social legitimacy is evaluated with a normative character. Objective criteria make it possible to determine satisfactory police interventions and decisions in the face of population demands and requirements.

Regarding the perception of rural youth in Panama, the security of the population has become one of the transcendental concerns of Panamanian citizens. When asked about the participants' perception of citizen defense in the place where they live, a high percentage considered that it is not a safe place to live. According to the perception of the students, there is no balance in terms of the perception of security in the community by its inhabitants. It is necessary to take measures before this problem worsens, a task that they entrust to the authorities, since they are responsible for monitoring and ensuring the welfare and safety, because if they have any problems, they turn to the police for their work to maintain the safety of the inhabitants.

For the young Panamanian participants in the research, safe justice is a relevant aspect that the police must assume. The phenomenon of corruption permeates various spheres of the State. Among them, the institutional police, without detracting from the social work and its importance in maintaining the security of the people. However, the news transmitted by the media related to acts of corruption undoubtedly affect the good image of the police. Some young Panamanian participants in the research alluded to the issue of corruption. In other words, young people's perceptions of the importance of the police depend on their experiences, the information circulating in the media and their aspirations.

In relation to the similarities and differences of the results with previous research, it can be affirmed that the social functions of the police are important in all cities. The institution's impact on the development of interpersonal relationships stems from its management and social intervention, fostering familiarity with the community. This approach aims to generate favorable perceptions among youth, motivating them to fulfill their responsibilities (Fajardo *et al.*, 2017).

Initially, the study by Fajardo *et al.* (2017) defines perception, as a process of recognition from a conglomerate of experiences to form a judgment towards emotional reactions. In this perspective, in the study, the perception of some young people in Panama about the police is negative because of the possible opinions constructed by the media narratives. These are important factors where perceptions are not very positive, as they show less confidence in police work, given that they are associated with phenomena such as corruption, experiences of disrespectful treatment and inefficiency. In this same perspective, Piccirillo (2024) reveals "the complex interaction between idealized perceptions of the police and the realities of police behavior, characterized by violence, racism and sexism" (p. 2). Similarly, the study by Orduño (2020) analyzes the school strategies proposed by the police to generate spaces for dialogue, which for our research strengthens coexistence and conflict solutions.

Another important and common concept for this study is that of social legitimacy. Orduño (2020) argues that the perception of prevention has a more significant meaning when it is necessary to subsidize the citizenship in obtaining safe spaces. For this reason, educational and youth action in conflict resolution can be used as a police strategy to reduce the phenomena of violence and criminal activities. This process conceives community work as a relevant factor of societies in overcoming social problems and inequalities.

Among the significant differences in the perceptions of young people is the importance of preventive programs for the reduction of types of violence (Ortuño, 2020), work that is proposed as a multidisciplinary factor of the police, which should have intervention sessions and preventive actions, with the purpose of articulating professions such as psychology, sociology and law, among others. This was not often requested by the participants. However, the perception of trust, security, leadership and honesty on the part of the police can be improved through the development of shared community projects and activities such as sports and recreation in alliance with different communities and representatives of civil society. To this end, information and communication mechanisms should be proposed that allow for feedback in the reconstruction of social fabrics within the framework of understanding together with social agreements (Fajardo *et al.*, 2017).

Another important factor in the disagreements has to do with the participants' indifference to the opinion of the mass media. For other studies, it is the media that interfere in changing young people's perceptions of the police. Television, radio, internet, social networks and news papers are instruments and tools that influence with biased information in the construction of erroneous or negative value judgments and that are of particular interests (Fajardo *et al.*, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

The results show the students' perceptions of the role of the police in the personal, community and social spheres. At the personal level, they mention security conditions, crime control and citizen protection. At the community level, they refer to social and corporate protection, conflict resolution and community safety. Socially, they refer to law enforcement, risk management, justice and corruption. These perceptions depend on the experiences and aspirations of young people according to the context in which they interact. In addition, the voices of rural youth contribute to reconfiguring the positive relationship between the police and the community in the search for understanding and citizen cooperation. This represents a significant advance in the valuation of these population groups as protagonists of social change in their communities.

In general, the young participants feel obliged to obey the police, following indications, because they think that they act mostly according to what is established in laws and norms that regulate the police function. The legalistic style of the police can favor social legitimacy, from the normative perspective, by ensuring compliance with the law and order, but it can affect it from the empirical perspective, by generating a perception of rigidity and distance between the police and citizens. Therefore, it is important that public security policies be based on a balance between effective police control and guaranteeing the rights and hardships of the population.

The young participants consider that conflict resolution is a fundamental function of police forces in their service to the communities in order to guarantee collective well-being, avoid dilemmas and legal proceedings that involve prolonging particular situations such as minor conflicts. The-

refore, it is important to recognize police work related to community care and their responsibility in the face of conflict in its various forms, as well as the need for community participation in crime prevention, the assertive reporting of irregularities, the recognition of rules and laws for their proper use and respect, building safer and more prosperous communities and families.

The police image for the young participants is associated with the activities prioritized by the directives, which focus on support in emergency situations, health care, development of recreational and welfare activities, in order to correct the negative perceptions that society has built against the actions of the police (Fajardo *et al.*, 2017). In other words, according to Rodriguez (2014), there is an urgent need to complete all efforts to transform and generate trust and satisfaction on the part of the recipients of police services. However, they relate the concepts of legitimacy and the good image that is constructed of the police, based on the strategic factor of compliance with rules within the jurisdiction for order, trust and harmony among the community. In the present research, an important factor in the construction of the perceptions of rural youth is the collective effectiveness of the actions and interventions of the police in criminal acts of corruption, crime and victimization. Thus, interest in police actions to prevent violence, especially gender violence among adolescents, is an important aspect for young people.

Finally, there is an urgent need to "design public policies that improve the interaction of adolescents with the security forces and promote their healthy and violence-free development" (Guibert *et al.*, 2024, p.17). To this end, it is necessary to make their voices visible, from a positive perspective, generating reflective spaces based on personal, local and global dimensions. There are several studies that highlight the negative views of young people towards the police force. Recognizing the actions carried out by the police in favor of the community can be an opportunity to establish alliances between these two population groups, in the search for responsible citizenship with societies, the environment and the human person. In addition, in several communities, young people aspire to join the military. For example, in studies conducted in Bolivia, they concluded that "Among the professions, studies related to health sciences, police or military and being a teacher stand out" (Antequera, 2024, p. 10) as an alternative to develop life projects.

Contribution to knowledge

The main contributions of the study are based on the recognition of the voices of young rural students in the reconfiguration of the police community relationship. For this purpose, the use of the 3 why thinking routine was pertinent, by enabling education for global competence and preparing our young people to engage in the world (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2011), to the extent that it is possible to explore perceptions about the police in the personal, social and global, recognizing the attitudes that young people have towards the police force. This can contribute to the construction of harmonious police-community relations by linking public policy to the need to listen to young people and opening spaces for dialogue among those who provide security, with the aim of promoting community interaction and valuing the protection, security and control provided by those who have chosen to serve their country in this way.

Limitations and strengths of the study and future lines of research

The main limitation was that only some young people from two countries (Colombia and Panama) were included. This study could be extended to other Latin American countries in order to provide greater coverage. In addition, it remains to be explored how perceptions “about the importance” of the police differ between reality and should be, based on their own experiences. In addition, it would be interesting to know the ideological approaches from the position of fathers, mothers and caregivers regarding the perceptions on this topic under study.

Also, as there is controversy about the perceptions of the performance and effectiveness of law enforcement institutions in addressing different social problems, as demonstrated in the research, there is not enough research exploring perceptions of police work among rural youth. For this reason, the present study contributes to the visibilization of the thinking of rural youth regarding the importance of the police in the personal, local and global dimensions. As The Zero Project (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2019) points out, establishing if anything is important, it is a capacity that is little explored when attributing the construction of learning in students. However, this research enabled the development of intrinsic motivations by un-covering the importance of polycitizenship in diverse contexts.

Regarding the strengths of the study, we highlight the ease of access to the participants due to the role of teachers and directors of the researchers, the methodological harmony between the thinking routine used and the thematic analysis that allowed for an appropriate interpretation of the young people's perceptions of the work of the police and the availability of the participants to give their opinion on the subject under investigation.

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