Mind the Blues

Swedish Police Officers’ Mental Health and Forced Deportation of Unaccompanied Refugee Children

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Policing is a public health issue. The police often encounter vulnerable populations. Police officers have wide discretionary powers, which could impact on how they support vulnerable populations. In encountering vulnerable populations the police officers are required to be professional; maintaining mental health in the face of challenges is part of professionalism. Their encounters with vulnerable populations might influence their mental health which in turn might influence the way they use their discretion when making decisions.

Sweden receives more unaccompanied, asylum-seeking refugee children than any other country in Europe. The number of asylum applications for such children increased from 400 in 2004 to 7000 in 2014 to over 35,000 in 2015. These children come to Sweden and apply for asylum without being under the care of their parents or other legal guardian. Some are denied asylum. If they do not return to their country of origin voluntarily the police are responsible for their deportation. The Swedish government wants an increasing number of deportations and wants them carried out with dignity. This thesis is about the police officers’ perceptions of how to interpret the seemingly contradictory demands for more deportations, that is, efficiency; and concerns for human rights during the deportation process, that is, dignity. This is conceptualized using three theoretical frameworks: a) street-level bureaucracy, b) job demand-control-social support model and c) coping. These theoretical frameworks indicate the complexity of the issue and function as constructions by means of which understanding can be brought to the police officers’ perceptions of deportation work involving unaccompanied, asylum-seeking refugee children and how such work is associated to their mental health.

The current research aims to investigate and analyse Swedish police officers’ mental health in the context of deportations of unaccompanied, asylum-seeking refugee children. The qualitative approach comprised interviews conducted to achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of police officers’ perceptions of deportations of unaccompanied, asylum-seeking refugee children. The quantitative method involved the use of validated questionnaires to investigate the association between police officers’ mental health and psychosocial job characteristics and coping. This approach made it possible to study a complex issue in a complex environment and to present relevant recommendations. A total of 14 border police officers were interviewed and 714 police officers responded to a survey.

The police officers utilize their wide discretionary powers and perceive that they are doing what is best in the situation, trying to listen to the child and to be aware of the child’s needs. Police officers with experience of deportations of unaccompanied, asylum-seeking refugee children were not found to have poorer mental health than police officers with no such experience. Furthermore, high job demand, low decision latitude, low levels of work-related social support, shift work and being single are associated with poor mental health. Coping moderates the association between mental health and the experience of carrying out deportations of unaccompanied, asylum-seeking, refugee children, and the police officers seem to utilize both emotional and problem-solving coping during the same complex deportation process.

The general conclusion reached in this thesis is that if police officers are subject to reasonable demands, have high decision latitude, access to work-related social support, and utilize adaptable coping, the deportation work does not seem to affect their mental health. When police officers meet vulnerable people, they utilize their discretionary powers to deal with seemingly contradictory demands, that is, efficiency and dignity. The executive role in the deportations of unaccompanied, asylum-seeking refugee children and the awareness of dealing with a child threatened with deportation might give rise to activation of a sense of protection, safety and security. Discretion might make it possible to act on this sense of protection, safety and security and to combine efficiency and dignity. Further studies, which integrate cognitive and emotional discretion with coping, need to be undertaken.

Keywords coping; decision latitude; discretion; job demand; mental health; police personnel; street-level bureaucracy, Sweden; unaccompanied, asylum-seeking refugee children; work-related social support