



# The significance of victim ideality in interactions between crime victims and police officers

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## ABSTRACT

A crime victim's first contact with the police may strongly influence subsequent investigations and prosecutions, as well as the crime's impact on the victim. The outcomes of such contacts may depend strongly on the degree to which the victim exhibits the characteristics of an ideal victim. This study sought to find valid ways of evaluating the constructs of victim ideality and police empathy, and to clarify the relationship between the two considering background factors, and outcomes. With a cross-sectional design data were collected from approximately 300 crime victims from cities in Colombia using a questionnaire. The data were analyzed using SEM, MIMIC, and logistic regression models. Being an ideal victim was found to influence the empathy displayed by police (as perceived by the victims), which in turn influenced factors important to citizens exposed to crime. Several areas in need of development based on the principles of procedural justice are identified.

## 1. Introduction

The problem of dealing with crime is a central issue in efforts to improve daily life for members of society. Crime prevention strategies can seek to reduce the adverse consequences of crime by reducing the number of crimes or the harm caused by crime (Jerin and Moriarty, 2010). The process of gathering and assimilating information from crime victims during their first contact with the criminal justice system can play a key role in such strategies and in shaping subsequent steps taken in the criminal justice system. Therefore, knowledge of how the actions of professionals are perceived during such critical situations can be extremely useful in crime prevention. Studies on the perspectives of crime victims have shown that several aspects of the first contact can influence subsequent steps such as finding the strength to proceed within the criminal justice system and to cope with daily life after a traumatic experience (Maddox et al., 2011; Wemmers and Cyr, 2006). The first representative of the criminal justice system in contact with a crime victim is often a police officer, who must uphold the general trust in the police and the legitimacy of the police force. Negative narratives that can adversely affect police – citizen relations are a common consequence of a crime victim not receiving an adequate response following a crime situation. Effective handling of the first contact is therefore vital for a well-functioning criminal justice system and thus for social harmony.

The paradigm of procedural justice, which emphasises the importance of procedures during the management of crime situations within the criminal justice system, plays a central role in first contact management because it highlights the need to consider procedures as well as outcomes. Consensual models of authority based on this paradigm are valuable when addressing police legitimacy because their primary goal is to explain why people trust authorities, acknowledge their legitimacy, and obey them (Tyler, 2017). The

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theory of procedural justice identifies four elements of experience that directly affect how police officers are perceived when making decisions: (i) voice, i.e. the extent to which citizens are allowed to offer their side of the story before decisions are made; (ii) neutrality, i.e. the perception that decisions made by the police are unbiased, consistent, and neutral; (iii) respect, i.e. whether police treat people with dignity, courtesy, and respect; and (iv) trust, i.e. whether the police act with trustworthy motives, having the goal of doing what is good for the people they are dealing with (Tyler, 1988, 2017).

Van Camp and Wemmers (2013) also highlight the importance of neutrality, trust, respect, and voice for fairness and the perception of fairness in the handling of crime situations. *Neutrality* requires police officers to act impartially and objectively when interacting with citizens who have been exposed to crime. The meaning of *respect* is straightforward and refers to making a citizen feel as a valued member of society, while the concept of *voice* relates to the victim's opportunities to be included and heard during the processes of the criminal justice system (Van Camp and Wemmers, 2013). In the context of an initial contact situation, voice relates to the victim's ability to be heard and included when giving their initial testimony. Another important issue is how the actions of police officers are interpreted during the different contact situations that may arise from different crimes.

What is required to ensure that a contact situation is perceived positively? There have been few empirical studies on initial contacts between police and crime victims, although some valuable contributions exist. A study conducted in the UK examined a sample of 22 rape cases to identify factors influencing progression through the criminal justice system (Maddox et al., 2011). Findings from the study revealed a significant correlation ( $r = 0.56$ ,  $p = .007$ ) between perceived empathy of the police (measured using the Empathic Understanding subscale developed by Barret-Lennard in 1978) and the likelihood of proceeding to court (Maddox et al., 2011). Another study used a qualitative approach to investigate the manner of questioning used by police officers and the extent to which the officer communicated belief or disbelief in the victim's testimony (Patterson, 2011). Based on a sample of 20 victims, it was concluded that when the victim perceived the communication to be gentle, more information was retrieved and the case was more likely to be prosecuted. The opposite was true when communication and questioning were perceived to be harsh and forceful (Patterson, 2011). The difficulty of collecting this type of data was highlighted by a study on satisfaction with the police service that was conducted in Louisville (Tewksbury and West, 2001). The study's design required respondents to provide their addresses because the researchers were investigating citizens' satisfaction with a specific division of the police; ultimately, only 50 valid and relevant offense summary reports were identified. The study's findings revealed a need to improve speed of response and indicated that the most important factor for satisfaction was perceived helpfulness in terms of providing information. Among victims, women were found to be more satisfied than men; it was suggested that this might be due to the police officers' form and tone when interacting with female victims (Tewksbury and West, 2001). Some large-scale studies focusing on interactions between police and victims have adopted a different methodological design. For example, the Project on Policing Neighbourhoods (POPNI) field study was based on observational data representing 1865 cases. Rather than gathering information from the victims themselves, the researchers gathered data by directly observing encounters (Foley and Terrill, 2008). This study's findings showed that female victims were more likely to be comforted than male victims and victims from the middle and above middle class were more likely to receive comfort than those from lower classes (odds ratio: 1.91; Foley and Terrill, 2008). A study on the value of procedural justice, social identity, and legitimacy conducted in Australia showed that legitimacy increases when police officers are perceived to act fairly during contacts with citizens and make efforts to help citizens identify with the group that the police represent (Bradford et al., 2014). This study also indicated that some of the association between procedural justice and police legitimacy was mediated by social identity. Notably, the study used longitudinal panel data, which made it possible to perform intra-individual modelling. The panel data was collected in two waves of surveys of 1023 Australian citizens, of whom 472 had contact with the police between the two data collection periods (Bradford et al., 2014). While the findings of these studies are valuable, most of them are based on rather small samples and rely on information provided by victims. It would therefore be useful to gather more nuanced information given the complexity of contact situations between crime victims and police officers.

The present study draws on survey data collected in Colombia and focuses on two major areas discussed in previous works: the characteristics that influence police officers' perception of a victim as an 'ideal victim' and how the victim's perceived status affects the adoption of an empathic contact style by police officers.

### 1.1. Ideal victim

The importance of being perceived as a crime victim has been highlighted by previous studies, in which it was assumed that attaining victim status resulted in better treatment by the criminal justice system. The attribution of different statuses to crime victims can cause a number of problems; for example, it may cause officers to question the truthfulness of a victim's testimony or to treat victims in different ways depending on their attractiveness and/or social status (Bynum et al., 1982; Greeson et al., 2016). Christie (1986) proposed a set of characteristics associated with 'ideal victims', which include being weak, engaging in respectable activities, not being involved in anything blameworthy, and/or having been the victim of a perpetrator who is physically stronger and who has no ties to the victim. These characteristics have been elaborated upon to describe 'good' crime victims in general (Jägervi, 2014). The ideal victim criteria have also been applied in the context of less common crimes, such as international crimes, although questions about their applicability in this context prompted an extension of the model (Van Wijk, 2013).

Mirroring the focus on 'ideal' offenders in criminology, the 'ideal victim' concept has been applied in a variety of domains in victimology (Duggan, 2018). However, the characteristics of an 'ideal' victim have evolved; whereas the definition was previously based mainly on a few background variables such as gender, a wider range of background variables are now considered important (Duggan, 2018). The ideal victim concept has also been connected to newer theories, making it possible to understand the role of *framing* at the individual level or collective levels. The Stereotype Content Model (SCM) has been used to describe and predict the

emotions and behaviours a group may display towards another group. This model is illustrated as a four-field model with the two dimensions warmth (low-high) and competence (low-high) (Bosma et al., 2018). Warmth refers to the extent to which the first group perceives the second group to be good-natured, friendly or for instance sincere, while competence refers to the first group's perception of the second group to be clever, competent or knowledgeable (Cuddy et al., 2008). A group perceived as having low on warmth and competence such as drug addicts may elicit negative feelings such as disgust, and fit one of the four fields termed contemptuous prejudice (Bosma et al., 2018). Conversely, groups such as elderly or housewives, perceived as having high on warmth but low on competence fit the field termed paternalistic prejudice. Members of such groups are typical ideal victims since they readily elicit sympathy but are also ascribed lower competence by the fact of being victims (Bosma et al., 2018). The SCM is helpful in explaining why some individuals may be less likely to be perceived as ideal victims; for example, a businessman may be considered to have high competence but perceived with little warmth (Bosma et al., 2018).

Whereas the SCM clarifies the criteria that determine whether a specific victim might be considered ideal, the Moral Typecasting Theory (MTT) can be used to understand the relationship between the victim and the offender. This theory assumes that moral situations require two moral parties: a moral agent who acts and a moral patient who experiences the agent's act. The act may be wrongful (for example, a crime) or good (Bosma et al., 2018).

A valuable study based on the framework of social identity theory focused on police recruits' perceptions of and attitudes towards victims of crime using the concepts *deserving* and *undeserving* (Charman, 2019). Longitudinal qualitative data relating to 24 police recruits were used to analyse the developing cultures of new recruits in England, revealing that police officers play a key role in defining a victim's status. In particular, the police recruits distinguished between those they considered deserving of help, who were referred to as 'genuine victims' and those undeserving of help, who were referred to as 'ingenuine victims'. Factors that could influence classification into these categories included race, income, employment, mental health, gender, age, location, and behaviour. The categorization could often result in differential treatment in terms of time spent: 'genuine' crime victims were deemed worthy of time whereas 'ingenuine' victims were not (Charman, 2019). A separate study based on 20 qualitative interviews of black people concerning the reporting of crime revealed that factors including race, gender, class, and migrant status also influenced communication between police and victims of crime (Long, 2021). Many of this study's respondents were found not to have been categorized as victims when reporting crime, and were instead categorized as "(un)victims". These individuals did not satisfy the previously described criteria for being seen as 'ideal victims' This illustrates the need to study multiple background factors when aiming to improve police-citizen relationships and mitigate the risk of inappropriate responses (e.g., suspicion) that may lead to secondary harm or revictimization (Long, 2021).

### 1.2. The role of empathy in policing contacts

The use of appropriate contact styles is important in victim-centred police work. Independent studies have shown that victims prefer gentle interviewing styles that are often described using terms associated with the construct of empathy (Patterson, 2011). Approaches using such interviewing styles are sometimes called empathic approaches, although this term is also used in reference to strategies and approaches that only indirectly relate to the concept of empathy (Maddox et al., 2011). As argued by Inzunza (2015a), empathy has a multidimensional structure with both affective and cognitive dimensions, and is associated with regulatory subconstructs including emotional regulation and self-other awareness, which are needed to maintain objectivity in the challenging environments police officers work in.

Previous studies on how to improve police interviews with victims have focused on approaches associated with the theoretical framework of empathy. For example, a study involving 77 serving police officers was conducted to find ways of improving police officers' understanding of victims' situations in order to reduce victim-blaming attitudes and train officers to get the fullest possible account of the crime from the victim (Darwinkel et al., 2013). The descriptions of the training components developed in this study highlight the need to understand situations from the victim's perspective, which is reminiscent of the perspective-taking subconstruct of empathy (Darwinkel et al., 2013; Inzunza, 2015a). The findings also suggested that a greater understanding of the processes surrounding the crime would be essential for improvement (Darwinkel et al., 2013). Another study focusing on police in the UK investigated how the principles taught in the Tier 1 PEACE CI (a training program for police officers on interviewing witnesses and victims of crime; PEACE stands for Planning and preparation, Engage and explain, Account, Closure, and Evaluation) were implemented by 48 novice police officers. It was found that not all parts of the procedure were used, with mental reinstatement of context being one of the least-used parts (Dando et al., 2009). One conclusion was that novice police officers should be trained in a less complex version of the procedure (Dando et al., 2009). Mental reinstatement of context entails asking a witness or victim of crime about the environmental and emotional aspects of the incident (Dando et al., 2009). Asking about emotional experiences requires some interest in the story being told and is related to the officer's ability to practice empathy in both the cognitive and affective dimensions.

A systematic review of 24 articles published between 2000 and 2016 that focused on deficiencies in the attitudes of police officers (e.g., blaming rape victims) showed that such attitudes were uncommon and found only in a few cases (Sleath and Bull, 2017). A more important factor was victim credibility, which some officers judged based on the state or actions of the victims (e.g., their level of drunkenness), and its influence on investigative decision-making (Sleath and Bull, 2017).

Victim characteristics and police responses appear to be related to one-another, which may explain some of the inconsistencies in reported findings; further research will be needed to clarify this issue. It is also important to consider how different constructs (e.g., empathy), victim characteristics, and police response/contact styles are measured. In particular, the operationalization of the constructs under study may influence the validity and interpretation of any results that are obtained. Finally, most research in this area has been conducted in Anglo-Saxon contexts; more research in other contexts is needed. Here, these issues are addressed by studying

interactions between police officers and crime victims in a South American country.

### 1.3. The colombian context

Crime rates and the day-to-day security of citizens in Colombia have been strongly affected by a number of key events since the early 1980s, many of which are related to the criminal activities of narco-trafficking cartels and the country's civil war (Moncada, 2010; Giménez-Santana et al., 2018). Several strategies have been implemented to tackle the resulting insecurity, some of which are closely linked to the war against drugs (Moncada, 2010). Others are consequences of the peace process with the group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (more often referred to by the acronym FARC), which has reduced the availability of weapons used in several types of crime. Today the types of crime that most commonly affect citizens are the same as in other cities around the world, notably theft and assault, as well as armed robberies (osac.gov). Crime is also unevenly distributed, differentiated by wealth and poverty, and concentrated in different areas of a city. For example, poorer citizens are more likely to be victims of domestic violence or homicide, whereas wealthy citizens are more likely to be victims of kidnapping and property crimes (Giménez-Santana et al., 2018). When considering the typology of the ideal victim, some variables that could be particularly important in the Colombian context stand out. One such variable is social status, indicated by where a victim resides; there could be important differences between residing in a middle-class area and residing in a less safe neighbourhood. The gender variable is also interesting when considered in combination with education and income: women with low education and income are disproportionately affected by domestic violence (Gaviria and Vélez, 2001). The violent history of the country can also be connected to more recent studies that have sought to explain how gender inequality is interconnected with a culture of honor and can be related to violent crimes such as assaults and muggings (Corcoran and Stark, 2018). In short it is suggested that a culture of honor affects societies at the macro level by making individuals more open to the use of violence to solve problems. Cultures of honor develop and exist when protection from the state is absent for extended periods of time and individuals must protect their property and family (Corcoran and Stark, 2018). Cultures of honor are also theorized to reinforce traditional gender roles, leading to consequences such as hypermasculinity. In relation to the typology of the ideal victim it would be desirable to determine whether such developments can influence encounters between police and victims, where variables such as social status and gender could play a central role.

Victim research in the Colombian context has been concentrated around the armed conflict that has been going on for over 50 years and has left more than 8 million victims living in Colombia (out of a population of 50 million). This conflict has led to the implementation of several policies based on the transitional justice paradigm, which is a form of justice adapted to societies that are undergoing a transformation following pervasive human rights abuse (Ochoa Sterling, 2019). Some studies have explored victims' experiences of the conflict. For example, a study on the effects of violence based the experiences of 284 victims of violence in Colombia showed that poverty can be a consequence of the psychological conditions imposed by pervasive violence (Moya, 2018). Victims exposed to traumatic episodes of violence suffer from elevated levels of anxiety, depression and posttraumatic stress, among other things, which diminishes (in some cases, temporarily) their ability to make rational long term economic decisions about issues such as investing in education, health, or income-generating activities (Moya, 2018). Studies on experiences of interactions between the police and victims of crime are more limited, but the available literature shows that trust is reduced by the experience of being a victim of crime. Notably, an analysis of the impact of insecurity and crime victimization based on survey data gathered in Colombia between 2004 and 2010 as part of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) indicated that being a victim of crime reduced trust in the criminal justice system to a greater extent than other institutions, and that trust in the police was most affected (Blanco and Ruiz, 2013).

### 1.4. Purpose and research questions

This study has two objectives. The first relates to the measurement of the two constructs under consideration (empathy and the ideal victim), and is addressed by developing an instrument incorporating some of the criteria included in the ideal victim theory and adapting an instrument for evaluating police empathy from a victim's perspective. The second objective pertains to the relationship between being an ideal victim and police empathy, its dependence on background factors, and the outcomes it may influence.

The research questions addressed are:

How can the characteristics of an ideal victim and police empathy be measured?

How is a victim's ideality related to police empathy, and how is this relationship affected by background factors in the studied context?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Procedures

This study is a part of a project that aims to better understand how crime victims perceive their contacts with the criminal justice systems in complex situations. The ability to collect data in Colombia resulted from a collaborative project between the Swedish Police and the Colombian national police that aims to develop crime prevention strategies in the Colombian context. Data collection was performed using a digital questionnaire during the beginning of 2020. Links to the questionnaire and information about the study were distributed through social media networks with ties to the police; examples include networks assembled around social leaders or representatives of local communities who hold recurring meetings about crime problems in their neighbourhoods. Both rural and

urban areas were included. Participation was voluntary and anonymous because the emphasis was on contacts between crime victims and police officers. The inclusion criterion for participation was that participants had to have been in contact with a police officer as a crime victim in the last five years.

## 2.2. Participants

In total, 323 individuals satisfying the inclusion criterion chose to participate in the study. Of the participants, 46% were female, 51% were male, and 3% chose the 'other' option to describe their gender. With respect to age, 34% of the respondents were 26–35 years old, 23% were 36–45 years old, and 21% were 25 years old or younger. The majority of the participants (72%) were from rural areas and the majority had recent experiences (over 59% within the preceding year).

## 2.3. The measures

An instrument to assess the ideality of a victim was developed to operationalize the theoretical concept of the narrative of the ideal victim proposed by Christie (1986). Items were developed based on the characteristics that were considered feasible to operationalize. Each item was subjected to quality assessment with respect to its content and the likelihood that it would be understood as intended. These assessments were conducted in collaboration with experts from the police context working with crime victims. The most promising items were included in a latent variable model to enable assessment of factor loadings and reliability. Two illustrative items from the final instrument are: *At the time of the incident, I was engaged in an activity that is part of my daily routine and not out late at night or attending a party* and *At the time of the incident, I felt physically weak or found myself in a vulnerable position*.

The instrument measuring perceived police empathy was developed by adapting a previous instrument for measuring empathy in the context of police work (Inzunza, 2015b). The original scale was developed as a self-reported measure for police officers or other professionals working under similar conditions that require the ability to understand others both affectively and cognitively while also applying regulatory mechanisms such as self-other awareness and emotional regulation (Inzunza, 2015a, 2015b). The items from the original instrument were adapted by changing their perspective such that they could be used to assess another person's perceived level of empathy in a contact situation rather than for self-reporting. The adapted measure is therefore referred to as *Citizen perceived police empathy* (CPPE). This adaptation is exemplified by the following item relating to perspective taking: *I can imagine what it's like to be in someone else's clothes* (self-report) was changed to *I felt that the police could imagine my situation during the incident* (assessment of another's perspective taking ability). The adapted items were reviewed by professionals with expertise in measurement, police officers with experience of working with victims, and native-speaking professionals because the original instrument was developed for use in another context with a different language. Perceived police empathy was evaluated by generating a latent variable model and examining its factor loadings and reliability.

The instrument also included questions relating to background factors, the context of the contact, and other variables that could influence the victim's situation. Such variables include the victim's gender, the nature of the crime, the day of the week on which the crime took place, previous experiences as a victim, the time elapsed between the incident and contact with police, neighbourhood safety (as perceived by the participant), and the form of contact (face to face or by phone).

Two dependent variables were included to assess the outcomes of the crime experience. The first related to whether the police gave the victim information about support available to crime victims and was coded 1 (information given) or 0 (information not given). The second related to how the victim's life was affected by the incident and was coded 1 (the incident did not affect the victim's life), 2 (the incident had a major impact but the victim continued trying to live as they wished), or 3 (the incident had a major impact and the victim felt unable to continue living as they wished).

## 2.4. Analysis

The gathered data were analyzed using a two-step procedure. First, theory-based measurement models with support in the data were developed, then a structural analysis using latent variables and corresponding observable indicators was performed. Two-step modelling strategies of this sort are needed to obtain a good understanding of potential problems that may arise with latent variable models that do not fit the data (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The effects of background variables assumed to influence the latent variables of the structural part of the model were tested using a multiple indicator multiple cause (MIMIC) model (Brown, 2006).

The models were assessed using multiple fit indices and tests. One was the Chi-squared test with degrees of freedom; in this case, a non-significant p value ( $p > .05$ ) indicates a model that fits the data well. However, this test can be considered excessively stringent and its results are highly sensitive to sample size. Also used was the root mean square approximation (RMSEA) and its 90% confidence interval. For RMSEA, cutoff values of 0.08 and 0.06 were used to identify acceptable and reasonable fits, respectively. Another index applied was the comparative fit index (CFI), for which values above 0.90 are considered to be a minimum requirement and values above 0.95 indicate a model with a good fit and low strain. Finally, the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) was considered, applying a cutoff value of 0.08 (Browne and Cudeck, 1992; Brown, 2006; Hu and Bentler, 1999). The models were estimated with a robust maximum likelihood (MLR) estimator to control for deviances from normality (Kline, 2015).

A logistic regression model with an ML estimator was also tested because the studied outcome variables were both ordinal and categorical (Kelloway, 2015). In this case, odds ratios indicating the likelihood that an increase of 1 standard deviation would affect the outcome variable were reported.

Descriptive analyses were conducted using SPSS (version 26). Analyses involving latent variables such as confirmatory analyses

(CFA), structural equation modelling (SEM), and logistic regression were conducted with Mplus Version 8 (Muthen and Muthen, 1998–2017).

The amount of missing data varied between the analyses. Some respondents had missing data for certain variables, but this did not influence the overall results. To evaluate the impact of missing data, the analysis was conducted including only respondents with complete data using a listwise deletion approach, and the results obtained were compared to those obtained when applying the multiple imputation method using all available data (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2017).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Measurement models

The latent variable analysis of the ideal victim construct revealed that a model using 5 indicators based on Christie’s theoretical arguments exhibited a good fit to the data: Chi square (5) = 4.225,  $p > .05$ ; RMSEA = 0 (CI 0.000 - 0.071), CFI = 1; SRMR = 0.02. The chi square value was non-significant. Standardized estimates (loadings) for these indicators ranged from 0.548 to 0.700 (Fig. 1). The Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficient for this model was 0.72, indicating that it is reliable in terms of its internal consistency.

The latent variable for citizen perceived police empathy (CPPE) was developed by adapting a self-report instrument previously developed for assessing empathy from the perspective of police officers (Inzunza, 2015a) and the resulting model exhibited a good fit to the data: Chi square (20) = 37.592,  $p < .05$ ; RMSEA = 0.052 (CI 0.025 - 0.078); CFI = 0.981; SRMR = 0.020. The chi square test value was significant but the other indices indicated a well fitted model. Eight items were considered suitable for assessing empathy from an *other* perspective. Standardized estimates (loadings) ranged from 0.577 to 0.912 (Fig. 2), and the model exhibited good reliability; its Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficient was 0.939.

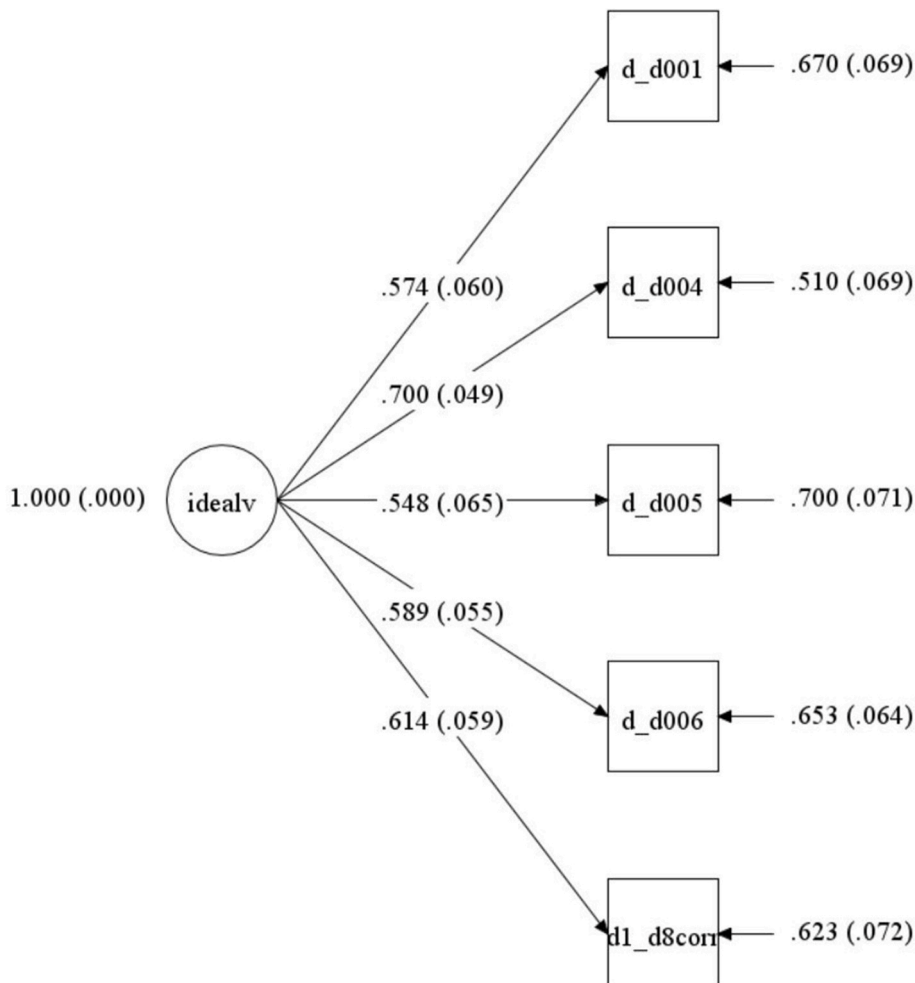


Fig. 1. Standardized estimates for a five-item measure of the Ideal victim.

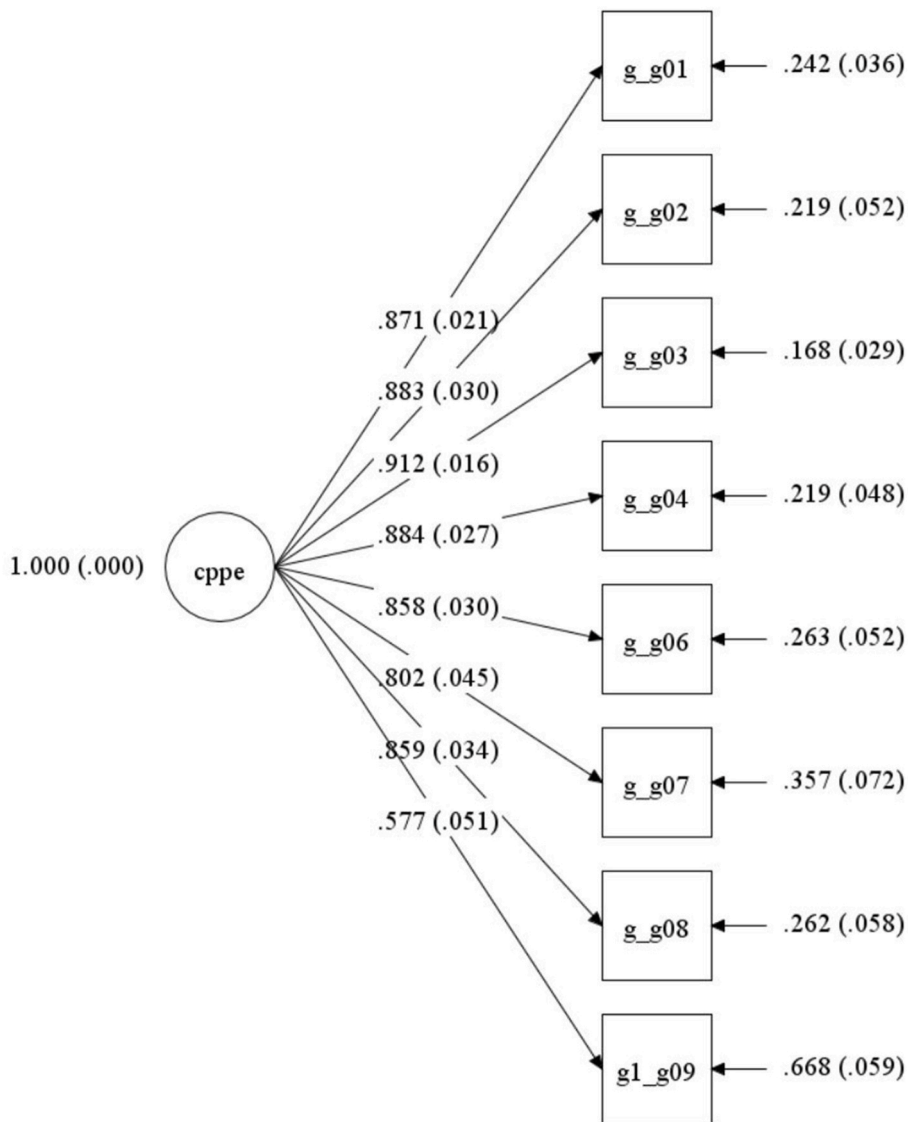


Fig. 2. Standardized estimates for an eight-item measure of Citizen Perceived Police Empathy (CPPE).

### 3.2. Structural model and MIMIC model

After establishing measurement models with no constraints, a structural model was developed to test the theoretically-motivated assumption that being an ideal victim in a crime situation would predict the perceived empathy of the police Ideal victim → CPPE. This model had support in the data: Chi square (64) = 106.431,  $p < .05$ ; RMSEA = 0.045 (CI 0.029 - 0.060); CFI = 0.974; SRMR = 0.035. Additionally, the standardized parameter estimate was significant ( $\beta = 0.357, p < .01$ ) (Fig. 3).

In the next step, covariates were added to develop the MIMIC model. The initial model included several covariates that could potentially affect perceived empathy such as gender, age, the day of the week on which the crime had been committed, and so on (see Table 1 in the Appendix). The resulting MIMIC model exhibited a good fit to the data: Chi square (141) = 221.242,  $p < .05$ ; RMSEA = 0.045 (CI 0.033 - 0.056); CFI = 0.960; SRMR = 0.035. Two covariates had significant effects on the model's latent variables. The first related to the respondent's previous experience as victim (PEV). PEV was coded as 0 = no prior experience as a victim and 1 = prior experience, and the standardized estimate of PEV → IdealV was (Stdy = 0.526,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that previous experience as a victim had a significant effect on the latent variable Ideal victim. The mean of the latent variable Ideal victim for respondents reporting previous experience as victims was 0.526 units higher than that for respondents without such experience. This effect is of medium size when judged using Cohen's d guidelines with the standardized estimate as the effect level (Brown, 2006). The other significant covariate related to the perception of neighbourhood safety (PNS). The standardized estimate of PNS → Citizen perception of police empathy (CPPE) was (Stdy = 0.239,  $p < .05$ ), where CPPE was coded as 1 = low, 2 = medium, 3 = high. This indicates that citizens

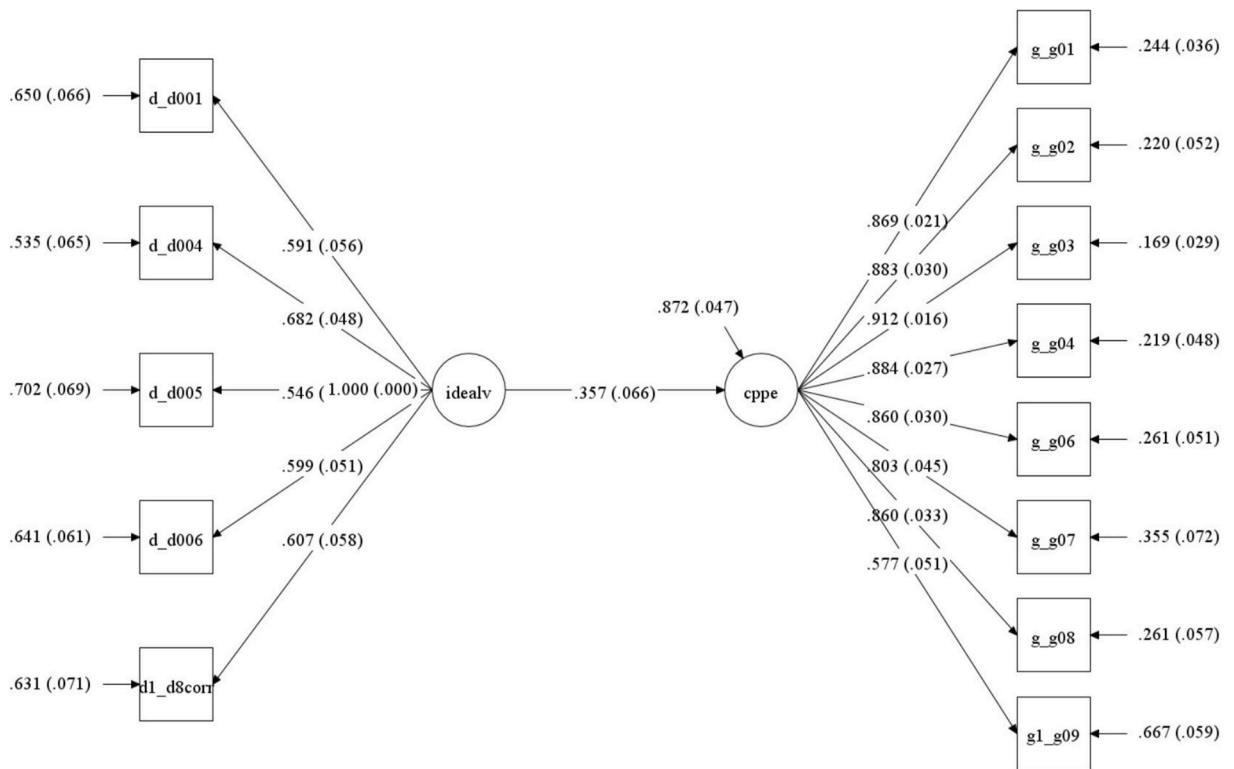


Fig. 3. Standardized estimates for a SEM model representing the structural relation Ideal victim → CPPE.

Table 1  
Covariates prediction on latent variables and significance level.

Covariate	Path	Standardized estimate	Significance level
Gender coded: 0 = female, 1 = male	Gender → IdealV	-.032	p > .05
	Gender → Citizen perception of police empathy (CPPE)	-.151	p > .05
Type of crime (TC) coded: 1 = personal, 2 = distant	TC → IdealV	.047	p > .05
	TC → Citizen perception of police empathy (CPPE)	.175	p > .05
Week day (WD) coded: 1 = mon to thurs, 2 = fri to sun	WD → IdealV	-.143	p > .05
	WD → Citizen perception of police empathy (CPPE)	-.030	p > .05
<b>Previous experience as victim (PEV) coded: 0 = no, 1 = yes</b>	PEV → IdealV	<b>.526</b>	<b>p &lt; .05</b>
	PEV → Citizen perception of police empathy (CPPE)	.042	p > .05
Elapsed time from incident to contact with police (ETCP) coded: 1 = short time, 2 = long time	ETCP → IdealV	.278	p > .05
	ETCP → Citizen perception of police empathy (CPPE)	-.100	p > .05
Perception of neighbourhood safety (PNS) coded: 1 = low, 2 = medium, 3 = high	PNS → IdealV	-.008	p > .05
	PNS → Citizen perception of police empathy (CPPE)	<b>.239</b>	<b>p &lt; .05</b>
Form of contact (FC) coded: 1 = face to face, 2 = phone	FC → IdealV	.022	p > .05
	FC → Citizen perception of police empathy (CPPE)	.048	p > .05

who considered their neighbourhood to be safer also felt that police displayed more empathy towards them during the contact. This effect was small (0.239) but significant.

### 3.3. Logistic regression

The logistic regression analysis included seven background variables and two latent variables influencing the dependent variables. The first dependent variable related to whether the police offered information about support activities available to crime victims and was coded as 1 if information was provided and 0 otherwise. Of the participants who provided complete responses, 199 received information and 42 did not. The latent variable of police empathy was significant (odds ratio = 1.70, p < .05), indicating that an

increase of 1 standard deviation in perceived empathy increased the likelihood of receiving information 1.70-fold. One covariate, namely the form of contact with the police officer (coded as 1 = face-to-face and 2 = by phone) significantly affected this relationship: face-to-face contact increased the likelihood of receiving information (odds ratio = 0.37,  $p < .05$ ).

The second dependent variable related to how the victim's life had been affected by the incident and was coded (in order of increasing severity of affect) as follows: 1 = lowest impact (153 respondents), 2 = moderate impact (61 respondents), 3 = severe impact (29 respondents). The latent variable ideal victim was significant (odds ratio 2.05,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that an increase of 1 standard deviation in victim ideality increased the likelihood of a severe negative effect on life 2.05-fold. There was one significant covariate, namely the perception of safety in the neighbourhood (coded 1, 2, and 3 indicating low, intermediate, and high perceived safety, respectively): respondents living in less safe neighbourhoods reported more severe life effects (odds ratio = 0.48,  $p < .05$ ).

### 3.4. Summarized results from the questionnaire

The two focal constructs Ideal victim and Citizen Perceived Police Empathy were measured in a valid and reliable way. Respondents with higher scores on the items measuring victim ideality perceived higher police empathy. The background variables included in the model also showed that participants with prior experience of being a victim had higher scores on the ideal victim variable than those without such experience. Participants who considered their neighbourhood to be safer perceived more empathy from the police officers than those reporting lower levels of neighbourhood safety. Perceived empathy from the police was also associated with getting information about the support available to crime victims, and the likelihood of getting information during face-to-face contacts was higher than during phone contacts. Respondents with higher scores for the ideal victim variable and those who perceived a lower level of safety in their neighbourhood were affected most strongly by the incident.

## 4. Discussion

The first objective of this work related to the measurement of constructs relevant in criminology and the police context. The initial contacts of crime victims with police officers (acting as representatives of the criminal justice system) are important for crime prevention and because reducing all types of harm resulting from crimes is a key goal in most societies. The outcome of the victim's first contact with police may affect the likelihood of retrieving information that could help advance the investigation of the crime and the prosecution of offenders. Previous studies (Maddox et al., 2011; Patterson, 2011) have identified some key factors that affect the outcome of the contact, notably the empathy shown by the police officer, as well as constructs that may influence the contact event such as the theoretical construct of the ideal victim. However, no previous studies have provided knowledge of how these theoretical constructs should be operationalized to enable empirical study of their influence in contact situations. In this work, an instrument was developed to measure the construct of the ideal victim, and a previously developed instrument for self-assessment of empathy was adapted to enable assessment of the empathy shown by another. Both instruments were shown to work well, allowing several of the characteristics of ideal victims proposed by Christie (1986) to be operationalized in the studied context. The findings showed that a unidimensional scale using multiple indicators could represent the ideal victim latent variable in terms of psychometric properties. The measure could of course be extended by adding more or different indicators, which is important because the ideal victim construct is probably context-dependent, as shown in previous study where it was adapted for use in the context of international crimes such as war crimes (Van Wijk, 2013).

The adaptation of the empathy measurement instrument was valuable because previous studies have shown that the potential for improving police officers' handling of contact situations is associated with the construct of empathy (Dando et al., 2009; Darwinkel et al., 2013). The latent variable representing police empathy from a victim's perspective (CPPES) was developed by adapting a pre-existing instrument that addresses several dimensions of empathy (Inzunza, 2015a, 2015b). The adapted instrument worked well in terms of psychometric properties. The measure of empathy was made unidimensional for multiple reasons. The first was to enable its use in an extended SEM model that could provide deeper insight into the relationship between the empathy shown by police officers during contacts and victim ideality. Another reason was the complexity resulting from the change in perspective upon switching from a self-reported assessment of empathy to assessing the empathy of another; unlike assessments of another's empathy, a self-reported instrument provides insights into the processes and thoughts of the person whose empathy is under study, which are not observable from the outside. One goal of this work was to analyse the processes at work during initial contacts with crime victims from an external perspective. This approach reduces the range of processes that can be examined but provides a more valid assessment of the construct under consideration (i.e., empathy) because it eliminates the risk that responses will be influenced by social desirability.

After developing the measures of perceived empathy and victim ideality, the structural part of the model could be tested and interpreted. The theoretical assumption under investigation was that perceptions of contact situations with police among citizens who had been victims of crime would depend on the degree to which those citizens matched the construct of the ideal victim (Christie, 1986). The model was based on two latent variables, victim ideality (evaluated using five indicators) and perceived empathy of the police officer (evaluated using eight indicators). These two latent variables were significantly related: the level of perceived empathy was higher for victims with higher values for the ideal victim latent variable. According to the paradigm of procedural justice, representatives of the criminal justice system should act in a neutral manner, showing impartiality and objectivity (Tyler, 1988, 2017; Van Camp and Wemmers, 2013). The interactions of police with non-ideal crime victims are therefore a matter of concern because more ideal victims report experiencing greater empathy from police, and the conceptualization of empathy used here includes being heard among other indicators. Previous studies have highlighted the value of information received through testimony; details relevant to a case can be difficult to obtain from the outside (Ginet and Py, 2001). It should be noted that gathering information from a crime victim

should not be the sole or primary objective in a contact situation and it is essential to maintain good relations with victims because they are citizens with the same rights as any other (Clark, 2003). Nevertheless, if the victim feels that they are being heard during a contact situation, it is possible that they will remember more about the crime and thus provide more useful information. Equally, if the participating police officer considers the victim non-ideal and therefore displays less empathy, the victim may not feel that they are being heard, and may fail to disclose relevant information. Therefore, victim-centred policing strategies can have important advantages for police work in addition to their social value (Clark, 2003). The finding that police officers may categorize or 'frame' victims as being either 'deserving' or 'undeserving', or as either 'genuine' or 'ingenuine' victims is important here because such categorizations could affect the amount of time spent with different victims (Bosma et al., 2018; Charman, 2019). Negative consequences such as loss of valuable information or biased treatment of victims (defined in accordance with the procedural justice paradigm) should be avoided (Charman, 2019; Tyler, 2017).

To better understand group differences in the latent variables, a MIMIC model incorporating several covariates was developed. The latent variable Ideal victim was significantly related to previous experience as a victim (PEV): respondents who reported previous experiences as a victim had significantly higher scores for the ideal victim latent variable than respondents without such experience. This may indicate that ideal victims were more frequently exposed to crime in the studied context, but it could also indicate that victims in this group were more prone to assert their blamelessness in crime situations because they had previously experienced societal consequences. This should be investigated further because several other interpretations are possible. For example, some citizens may pay less attention to risk behaviours associated with being victimized.

The perception of police empathy was also significantly related to perceived neighbourhood safety: respondents perceiving low levels of neighbourhood safety reported less perceived police empathy which is inconsistent with the paradigm of procedural justice (Tyler, 1988). This could occur for several reasons in the studied context; to start with, the recent history of the country has been very turbulent and the police have been fully occupied with duties far from most citizens for extended periods in a context where crime has been and remains unevenly distributed (Giménez-Santana et al., 2018; Moncada, 2010). These conditions can be expected to affect variables that are important in contact situations between crime victims and the police. The concentration of police officers or police activities in the wealthier areas of a town to maintain order may also be an important factor, as discussed in a study on security, police and inequality in Colombia (Uprimny and Uribe, 2013). It was found that citizens with comparatively low political power (who often belong to groups with low socioeconomic status) perceived higher levels of inequality than other citizens. If fewer police are available in neighbourhoods of low socioeconomic status with low safety, the time spent in contact with citizens experiencing crime may be affected, causing such citizens to perceive less empathy from the police. This in turn may reduce the likelihood that crime victims from such neighbourhoods will receive information about available support. This is consistent with the results of the logistic regression analysis, in which the latent variable of empathy predicted the provision of information on support activities by police officers. The second outcome variable related to the severity of the crime's impact on the victim's subsequent life. Individuals living in less safe neighbourhoods reported more severe impacts and more negative experiences following the crime. Interestingly, the variable pertaining to the unequal distribution of crime in certain neighbourhoods appeared to be more strongly related to the propensity of individual police officers to show empathy than to gender. The concept of revictimization based on a victim's background or place of residence may be important in this context (Charman, 2019; Long, 2021). In addition, gender was not related to identifying oneself as an ideal victim. It thus seems that the hypothesized culture of honor did not strongly influence victim ideality in the studied sample. The national police of Colombia is a dynamic police force that is undergoing transitions in both structure and internal priorities due to the adoption of new crime prevention strategies, and there is considerable evidence of improvements in performance. The police have recently become able to focus on the mission of combating crime without having to allocate resources to other tasks as they did during the country's recent conflicts. Additionally, murder rates in Colombia have fallen over time (Tamayo-Arboleda and Norza-Céspedes, 2018). Projects have also been initiated to improve relations with various groups of citizens holding negative attitudes towards the police, such as university students (Vesga et al., 2017). The implementation of procedural justice is expected to have positive effects on police-citizen interactions and to thereby increase police legitimacy among crime victims (Donner et al., 2015). Blanco and Ruiz (2013) found that being a victim of crime reduced trust in the police between 2004 and 2010 but the reasons for this were not elaborated upon, and as noted by Charman (2019), police officers play a crucial role in defining victim status, making it essential for them to treat all victims of crime equally.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined contacts with police from the perspective of victims. Few such studies have been published, meaning that many of the findings presented herein may be valuable for improving police-citizen relations. The major contribution of this study is that it connects major theoretical issues on the basis of valid operationalizations of complex constructs such as 'ideal victim' and 'perceived police empathy'. Models based on these theoretical principles and constructs incorporating several potentially influencing variables were created and used to study the impact of victim ideality on perceived police empathy during interactions between police and crime victims in the Colombian context. Relationships between police and crime victims observed in other parts of the world were also observed in the studied context, and should therefore be considered by police organizations as they refine their working practices to improve and maintain legitimacy with crime victims.

It was found that non-ideal crime victims perceived lower levels of empathy from police officers. This is important because it may indicate an ongoing tendency for officers to categorize victims as deserving or undeserving, which is incompatible with the principles of procedural justice and the goal of giving equal attention to all victims, which is important for the police to be seen as an organization with legitimacy (Charman, 2019; Tyler, 2017). The observation of multiple negative consequences for victims living in

neighbourhoods with low perceived levels of safety is also important and needs further investigation. The apparent association between neighbourhood safety and police empathy may be related to the previously reported negative consequences of being a victim of violence in relation to concepts such as revictimization (Long, 2021; Moya, 2018).

A potential limitation of this work stems from its use of self-reported measures in which contact situations were evaluated from the victim's perspective; this approach inevitably means that the responses incorporate a great deal of subjectivity and we cannot be entirely certain that all of the reported interpretations of contact situations are valid. Nevertheless, the results obtained provide several valuable insights that could enable improvements in crime prevention by reducing harm. Additionally, the developed instruments provided valuable insights into the constructs of the ideal victim and police empathy by incorporating the perspective of the crime victim. Several steps were taken to ensure that the measures chosen to operationalize these constructs were adequate and valid. It would be useful to complement the results obtained with qualitative in-depth interviews to investigate risk behaviour among crime victims in order to clarify the findings obtained here. Another useful approach could be to include observational data on encounters (Foley and Terrill, 2008).

A notable limitation of several previous studies on the issues examined in this work stemmed from the difficulty of reaching a large enough group of respondents to obtain valuable information. The number of participants in this study was considered large enough to reveal valuable trends among crime victims. However, it would be valuable to conduct a larger scale study with more participants to obtain a more valid understanding of victims' perceptions of police in contact situations. This could possibly be done by implementing a protocol including the most important parts of the instruments used here during encounters between victims and police. Similar data collection strategies are being initiated or implemented in other national contexts, potentially enabling comparative analysis.

Contacts with the police should not introduce further complexities into a victim's situation. Therefore, the Colombian police is planning to make several changes in the organization of police work. The use of evidence-based knowledge in crime prevention should be central to these efforts. The findings presented here will be valuable both for improving the experiences of future citizens who experience crime and for pinpointing areas in need of development when creating new crime prevention strategies. They will be particularly valuable for implementing the educational transition that will be needed when training police officers in procedural justice and crime prevention in the Colombian context.

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