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Whose security counts?

Young women sensemaking of the public security and the police through the policy feedback lens

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Introduction

In Belgium, 83% of women report having experienced street harassment at least once (Belga, 2023). Yet, this kind of public security matter is most often studied as a criminological matter: crime rates, policies efficiency, victimization statistics or through the feminist lens examining how these experiences are structurally produced by gendered power dynamics. This research starts from a different premise: how citizens experience public security, how institutions respond to their concerns shape something more than just their sense of safety but directly influence how they understand their own citizenship.

This argument is grounded in the policy feedback literature, which argues that public policies influence citizens' political attitudes and behaviors (Pierson, 1993). Policies and their implementation convey multiple messages through how they distribute resources, citizens' interpretation and the norms they encode. Subsequently, citizens deduce who they are, what they deserve and how legitimate they are recognized by the state and its institutions. Regarding public security, how the police institutions respond to citizens' concerns is particularly salient given it is the actor primarily responsible for its maintenance.

However, this literature remains largely dominated by American cases, that differ vastly from the European, and more specifically to the Belgian institutional context. Meanwhile, the existing Belgian literature on police-citizen relations rather focuses instead on the influence of responsiveness and procedural justice (Van Craen & Skogan, 2015). And the evaluation of the police performance relies overwhelmingly on intra-institutional reports rather than citizens' own perceptions (Tange, 2004). Thus, leaving a significant gap; engaging with the policy feedback literature provides more insight into how Belgian citizens (and particularly women) make sense of their safety, the police and through it the state.

This research addresses this gap by asking: How does Belgian citizens' sensemaking of the police shape their standing as citizens before the state, and how is this process shaped by gender?

To do so, this research draws on 18 semi-structured interviews conducted with young and adult citizens in Mons, focusing on how gender shapes their sensemaking of public security and police related matters. The thesis proceeds as follows: first a literature review exploring the theoretical concepts as well as the existing empirical insights, then the methodology, the analysis highlighting the relevant excerpts from the interviews in relation to the literature, the

interpretation addresses the theoretical insights and link them to the policy feedback lens. Finally, the discussion wraps up the research by synthetizing the findings, its theoretical contributions and the limits of this research.

Literature Review

Policy feedback literature

My research will be embedded in the policy feedback literature. This literature seeks to explain how policies can shape one's view on the political world as a whole or specifically about some of its components. This literature classically focuses on 3 types of actors and 2 different mechanisms that have effects on the view of the political world. The actors are the government elites, the interest groups, and the mass public.

The mechanism are the resource and incentive effects and interpretive effects (Pierson, 1993). To these mechanism, a third one has been since used by some scholar such as C. Dupuy, called the normative effect (Verhaegen et al., 2021).

The resource and incentive effect focus on "how resources and incentives provided by policies shape patterns of behavior" (Mettler & Welch, 2004). For the mass public actor it may translate as resources and incentive provided by welfare states that have effect on life trajectories of citizen, especially concerning their career path. This effect primarily focus on the cost/benefit method of choice used by citizen (Pierson, 1993). For example, the educational benefits that veterans benefited through G1 Bill granted them more civic capacity through a better education and thus a greater civic engagement (Mettler & Welch, 2004).

Secondly, the interpretative effect study how policies "convey meaning and information to citizens" (Mettler & Welch, 2004). This effect focuses on a more psychological approach to understand how citizen make senses of the world, taking into account the complexity of societies and how citizen use a variety of cognitive shortcuts to produce their own sense-making (Pierson, 1993). For instance, G1 Bill did not solely had a resource effect, through recognition given to the veterans and the direct link between this policy and the state, veterans felt valued as first-class citizens and incorporated in the society, heightening their civic involvement and political participation (Mettler & Welch, 2004).

The normative effect stresses the importance of norms brought by institutions and policies that shape what the government wants to be (Verhaegen et al., 2021). This effect focuses on the shared construction of norms by groups of citizens in interaction with the public policies they encounter in their lives. This effect is associated with the concept of political socialization because it highlights the influence of public policies on the construction of norms thus shaping

collective political attitudes and behaviors (Dupuy & Van Ingelgom, 2023). For example, young Walloon citizens socialized in a context of increasing regionalized competences in Belgium tend to support process of regionalization compared to older generational cohort because the norm, in their formative years was regionalization (Verhaegen et al., 2021).

This research focuses on the mass public actor, the citizenry because they are the one who are affected by public security and its threats during their everyday lives. In this case, *a priori* the most salient mechanisms are the interpretative and normative effects. Firstly because the police institution, as pointed out by Lerman and Weaver, convey meaning to the citizen on how the state perceive and define them (Lerman & Weaver, 2014). Secondly, those policies often affect groups of citizen that are socialized to this institution very differently thus creating variable attitudes and behaviors toward police agents and the institution as a whole (Schuck & Rosenbaum, 2005).

To study efficiently those effects, this research must study not only one public policy related to the police institution but rather broaden the scope and use an open and "holistic approach considering multiple experiences and representations" (Dupuy & Van Ingelgom, 2023) may influence citizen sense-making. Thus it is crucial to broaden the scope to study how the larger policyscape, a dense range of policies that structure citizens' lives, affects them (Mettler, 2016).

Sensemaking

This research puts a great emphasis on citizens' sensemaking since this will shape their attitude and belief toward the police. Sensemaking is a concept originally conceptualized in management and organizational studies by Karl Weick assessing the process where changes in the organizational environment that creates discontinuity and/or variation and thus grabbing attention from organizational actors "prompting recursive cycles of enactment, selection, and retention, meant to reduce equivocality." (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Since the first formalization of this concept by Weick, scholars have developed it in various ways and context adapting it to certain context like entrepreneur in a business launch context. However, in this research, sensemaking will be oriented toward citizens in the social context of Belgium's society.

Therefore, the basis of the concept of sensemaking used in this research lies in this simple statement "sensemaking is a process of social construction in which individuals attempt to interpret and explain sets of cues from their environments" (Maitlis, 2005). However, this definition is insufficient, in a more refined way sensemaking allows individuals to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate and predict thus creating rational account to the past present and future events and cues occurring in the social world shaping their behaviors, beliefs and attitude (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Furthermore, it is important to note that this process of social construction is not secluded to an individual mechanism as "ethnographic studies of policy reform and sensemaking indicate that individuals do not develop reform beliefs as isolated individuals but rather seek out peers to engage in discussions and formulate shared understandings" (Siciliano et al., 2017). Empirically, sensemaking is linked with the formation and the changes of the social structure, thus directly influencing social roles and relationships between groups in the society, in this case the police institution and its agents and the citizens (Maitlis, 2005).

To summarize, this research uses the concept of sensemaking to explore how citizens' process of understanding the social world (in this case focusing on the police and the security policies) they live in shapes their belief, attitude and their relationship with law enforcement agent taking into account that they might create sense through interactions with their fellow citizen.

Public security

The concept of security is very broad but can be defined as the satisfaction of needs such as existence, survival, certainty, stability, wholeness, identity, independence, protection of life level, and quality (Gierszewski & Pieczywok, 2021). Security is linked to "a specific state of threats directed at the subject for its fundamental needs and basic values" and the perception of these threats by the entity. Security changes over time, also this evolution implies different levels of security, from theoretical absolute insecurity and absolute security with all the nuances in between (Gierszewski & Pieczywok, 2021).

This research focuses precisely on public security, this concept is defined by Elżbieta and Edward Ura as such: "public security is a state of affairs in which all citizens, individually indeterminate, living in the state and society are not threatened by any danger, regardless of what its source might be. The protection of this security belongs to the state, which defines the limits of security and determines what disturbs or may disturb the normal functioning of the state. It refers primarily to the danger in communication, road traffic, water traffic and during

disasters, natural calamities, epidemics, as well as various kinds of attacks, robberies, and thus the protection of life, health, property of citizens, and social property against unlawful attacks violating these goods" (Gierszewski & Pieczywok, 2021).

This research focuses on the threats that can affect people in their everyday lives, in the street, when they are going to work, taking part to a public event, when they are shopping, wandering, etc. It excludes threats to certain types of security, employment security, food safety, etc. But it includes threats to people's body, possession, health and to traffic security.

The feeling of insecurity

While there is an objective way to quantify the degree of public security of a neighborhood or a circumscription based on criminal incidence, threats, and disorder. This research will rather use the subjective perception of security. This dimension focuses on three main aspects ; fear of crime, perceived risk and security behaviors (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022). Those aspects form an individual evaluation of their public environment that is rooted in their interpretation of risks, threats in a designated location and time (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022).

The fear of crime (FOC) refers to the evaluation of the risks of being a victim of any offenses in the public space, previous victimization plays a very important role in this evaluation. Also personal victimization represent a bigger threats and give a more lasting feeling than property crime (Gaitán-Rossi & Shen, 2018). FOC also refers to the concern regarding local characteristics that create vulnerability such as social inequality, legal order, trust in the police and signs of disorder in the community (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022). Two components will be crucial in this study, trust in the police and the signs of community disorder. Trust can be defined as such "confidence in the reliability of a person or system, regarding a given set of outcomes or events" (Cao, 2015) in this case it is directed toward their local police enforcement agents and is often related to the efficacy and responsiveness of the institution (Van Craen & Skogan, 2015). On the other hand, community disorder represents a broad spectrum of contextual indicators like graffiti, illicit market such as drugs and prostitution, social disorder (public intoxication, drugs consumption, presence of gang members), presence of garbage or homeless people (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022). High level of community

disorder contributes to a representation of weak social controls (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022).

Conversely, FOC is diminished when "there is familiarity with the neighborhood and members of the community, as well as social integration, trust, building of networks and social capital, collective efficacy and maintenance of community norms. Physical incivilities are one of the main community-level predictors of fear of crime, along with collective efficacy." (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022).

The feeling of insecurity is a complex and fluid concept whose component can change according to the people because it relies on subjective, personal interpretation of the social environment. Paradox with objective parameters can be observed, there can be a greater perception of insecurity by an individual who lives in an objectively secure environment than by an individual who lives in an objectively more insecure environment (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022).

Trust and political trust

Trust is a major component of this research and possesses multiple and diverse definitions. Here, we will use two different definitions of this concept. One that is global to the conception of trust and another related to political trust.

First, Rotter defines trust as "a generalized expectancy held by an individual that the word, promise, oral or written statement of another individual or group can be relied upon" (Bigley & Pearce, 1998). Hence, for the case of this research this would translate as the sensed reliability of the state to assure its conservation of domestic security and justice mission by the citizens. Trust and distrust are also connected to a notion of vulnerability for the individuals, trust can only exist if there is a possibility that the counterpart of the relationship does not stick up to its engagements or betray the individual (Bigley & Pearce, 1998). This ties with the idea that "risk one takes depends on the performance of another actor" (Coleman, 1994) and hence risks taken by individuals concerning their own security in society are, at least to a certain extent, conditioned by the ability of the state to assure public security and a threat-less environment.

On the other hand, political trust is the evaluation of trustworthiness of the political system based knowledge and information can gather about their state and government (Hooghe et al., 2012). Moreover, for the purpose of this study a link will be made between political trust and generalized trust. This latter refers to the trust expressed toward other individuals through interactions in citizens' everyday lives (Uslaner, 2002).

Here, contrary to the call of Hooghe, these two forms of trust are differentiated (political and generalized trust) in order to get a more detailed analysis of these processes. I argue that in this topic of research it is necessary to link both. Law enforcement agents represent the police institutions when they are in direct contact with citizens. There is no clear-cut distinction between the trust expressed toward individuals and the institution in our case-study. Also, even when addressing issues that concern citizen to citizen incidents, the role of the state is at stake because the preservation of a secure environment is its role. Although, it has to be noted that the link between generalized and political trust should not be automatically assumed and must be studied case by case in accordance with the sense-making of individuals.

Lastly, it is important to note that this research does not put the emphasis on pinpointing a certain level of trust among citizens nor does it try to justify whether the level of trust is legitimate or not. However, trust is in this case used as a mediating element allowing individuals to express themselves about the police and can also give the researcher components that guide us to understand if the interviewee vision tends toward a positive or negative perspective about the institution and its agent. This improved understanding is possible because trust can be put on a spectrum going from "untrustworthy" to "trustworthy" whereas other elements used by interviewees might be more abstract. In short, trust while not being the key element allowing to understand the complex sensemaking of citizens stands as a mediating component facilitating our understanding of the global perception and sensemaking of individual.

Characteristics

The existing literature has developed a broad array of characteristics that influence the citizens' sensemaking of the public security policyscape.

Gender

Gender is a significant factor in this topic. While 39% of Belgians state feeling sometimes a feeling of insecurity in Belgium (Belga, 2022), 95% of women feel sometime in some kind of danger in the street and among these 95%, 15% feel rarely or never in security in the public space (Belga, 2023). This latter number goes up to 23% in Wallonia. Moreover, 83% have been subject to street harassment at least once in their life and 90% of women change their behavior in order to avoid street threats (Belga, 2023). Those statements induce that women might be more concerned by public safety issue than men since they represent a public more threatened during their daily lives.

Moreover, women are socialized to fear crime more than men, they are taught about their physical vulnerability, and they are more aware of the threat of sexual violence and victimization in the public space. Sexual violence can be conceptualized as a continuum recognizing the multiplicity of its forms, though it is marked by the logics of gendered power structures that affect women negatively (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023). Sexual violence acts occurs through unwanted verbal and physical contacts as well as physical proximity performed by known or unknown men (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022). The severity of these acts goes from "common" threats such as sexual objectification, sexual harassment in the street like catcalling, whistles, unwanted conversation requesting a date, phone number, etc. but also concerns more harmful acts such as physical assault, rape, sexual touching, etc. (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022).

It is important to note that the perception of what is sexual harassment acts, while having objective component such as the unwanted nature, the sexual intention, the repetition, belong to every women and the breadth of the sets of act considered as sexual violence is personal and relies on experience and subjective assets (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022).

Women are structurally strongly advised to adopt behaviors to protect themselves and avoid risks (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022). The sum of this preventive actions that women undertake in order to avoid or limit sexual violence acts named "safety work" (Vera-Gray &

Kelly, 2020). These adaptions actively restrict women freedom in the public space while being necessary in a context marked by daily sexual violence acts (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020).

Area of living

Disadvantaged neighborhood are areas with noteworthy lower income population than the average of the country and higher levels of drugs or violence issues (Lerman & Weaver, 2014). Moreover, those areas are expected to be underserved by police and at the same time people from them are more subjected to aggressive oversight by agents. Those areas are also subject to multiple stigma that affects their inhabitant in their daily lives (Lerman & Weaver, 2014). On the other side, advantaged neighborhoods aren't expected to suffer from stigma and are expected to have average income populations and average level of drugs and violence. Inhabitant of the disadvantaged neighborhoods are expected to trust less the state, its institutions and the way public safety issue are managed while also being more concerned about those issues because they have a higher chance of being subject to threats to their daily safety (Lerman & Weaver, 2014)

Custodial citizenry

The second topic specific criteria used will be the difference between non-custodial and custodial citizens. The latter is a category of citizens who have had at least once in their life, but often multiple times, contact with the criminal justice system. This category does not include solely citizen that went to prison or have been prosecuted in court but also those who have been stopped and frisked, arrested with or without formal charges, detained in police station, placed under control by the police, etc. (Lerman & Weaver, 2014; Owens & Walker, 2018). Therefore, this category does not include only criminals but also other citizens that may not have done anything wrong. They are expected to represent a larger group of the disadvantaged neighborhood populations (Lerman & Weaver, 2014).

While citizens often tend to undermine the role of the state in their daily lives (Mettler, 2011), custodial citizens are more likely to have more emotional, salient and durable feelings toward the state because of their criminal system contact (Fairchild, 1977). This is the case because these interactions are often involuntary, they represent a direct and obvious contact with the state institutions and thirdly, these interaction can be stigmatizing, humiliating and can be associated with other feelings such as dehumanization or trauma (Lerman & Weaver, 2014).

Custodial citizen are expected to have deeper distrust in the government and its institutions than other social groups (Lerman & Weaver, 2014).

Self-perception of group belonging

It is important to note that policy target group not only affects the specific group of citizens but, by spillover, affect the perception of citizens that feel part of the target-group for any reasons even when they are not subjected to the specific policy (Simonsen, 2021). For example, extra police presence in a neighborhood does not only transmit a symbolic message to offender (target group) but also to other citizens living in the neighborhood that may also feel targeted by this policy.

Local vs global police institution conception

It is important to note that in a pilot-interview one very salient conception coming from the interviewee was the differentiation between local police and global police institution conception.

On one hand, neighborhood police conception is formed through the lived experiences of a citizen, or experiences lived by someone close to him/her. On the other hand, the global police conception is influenced by what is shown on the media like TV or social networks. Those two conceptions can differ greatly and thus result in two different feelings toward the police institution for a single individual.

This assessment is supported by the results of Schuk and Rosenbaum study in the USA where they argue that citizens are sophisticated in the way they conceptualize “the police” and “the police in my neighborhood”. Also, the police institution’s legitimacy is linked both to the assessment of the neighborhood police performance and the global conceptualization of the police (Schuck & Rosenbaum, 2005).

The police institution in Belgium

In Belgium, the police institution consists of two different sub-organizations: the federal police and the local police forming the "integrated police". Those two levels are both autonomous and not linked by hierarchical relationship (*Présentation | Police Fédérale*, 2025). While the federal police is led by a General Commissioner under the control of the supervision of the ministry of Justice and the ministry of Home affairs (Verhage et al., 2022). The local police is divided in 181 local law enforcement zone (*Présentation | Police Fédérale*, 2025) each directed by police's chief (Verhage et al., 2022).

In terms of function, the federal police handle the administrative police which concerns safety on certain roads and highways, border control, railway and station security, etc. on a supra-local level (*Police administrative | Police Fédérale*, 2025). The federal police also run the judiciary federal police which is active against organized crime and also provides support of different nature (operational, administrative, logistic) for the local police (*Police Fédérale | Police Fédérale*, 2025).

The local police on its part, handle "seven basic tasks": neighborhood policing and proximity work, reception at the police station, intervention, police assistance to victims, local research, law enforcement and road safety (*Présentation | Police Fédérale*, 2025).

Previous researche stated that the "police appear to remain accessible, locally oriented and locally involved" and thus having a good and trustworthy relationship with the citizens (Verhage et al., 2022). Then being on a very different path than police in other countries such as France, Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Scotland and Sweden that have undergone various policies that led them to tend to an "abstract police" (Verhage et al., 2022).

Abstract police define a police institution that developed internal and external relationship more distant and increasingly less personal over the years (Verhage et al., 2022). The change of the relationships' dynamic and the path to more centralization are due to numerous factors such as international terrorism, economic crises, new public management reform (optimizing cost-effectiveness of the institution) and the COVID-19 crisis (Verhage et al., 2022).

However, it is important to note that the previously cited paper about the accessibility of the police was made via an internal observation of the police within the institution and thus has a completely different look at the institution than this research conducted with the policy

feedback literature focusing on the citizen side of the relationship. The tendency to focus more on internal issues and the police side of the relationship when studying the police is also present at the institutional level where most evaluations emphasize on those aspects (Tange, 2004).

Thus, leaving a great gap in the literature on both the substantial and methodological component. First, not extensively taking into account citizens' point of view might create a police-sided worldview and literature. This research seeks to fill this gap by focusing solely on the citizens' sensemaking and thus improving our understanding of the dynamics in the relationships between the citizens and the police institution. The objective to improve this understanding is crucial since multiples research have proven that perceptions about the police can lead to trust in the institution and its agents, which results in police legitimacy and more cooperation from citizens (Verhage et al., 2022).

Secondly, regarding the methodology, many evaluations within the institution and research focus on results, efficiency, profitability rates (Tange, 2004), and objectives accomplishments as well as performance (Verhage et al., 2022). While having its own objectives, these tools fail to provide any extensive sensemaking that would produce a more comprehensive understanding of the different realities encountered by both police officers and citizens and how these influence their perception and attitude. This research only study citizen but further work focused on the police officer side using the same methodology would grant scholars the full, precise and concrete picture about the dynamics at stake in the relationship between citizens and the police institution and its agents.

Existing Belgian literature

In Belgium, little to no literature about this subject currently exists, one article approaches this topic with research about the trust in the police and subsequently procedural justice in Belgium. This paper, written by M. Van Craen and W.G. Skogan, depicts the importance of citizens' perception of police responsiveness and the relevancy of procedural justice as the main factor for trust in the police institution. Another key factors are victimization and the feeling of insecurity (Van Craen & Skogan, 2015).

Even though this research can provide to some extent answers to my questioning, it lacks accuracy regarding my specific topic. I think it would be false to consider trust in the police and broaden it to trust in the government in general. The trust in police and police officer can be really variable depending to former experiences with police agents. Moreover, some key

factors in this article is directly related to the police and not to policies decisions made by the government. For example, police responsiveness is a field issue determined by the local police institution. Political decisions made regarding fight against criminality and the possible insecurity are, even though related to police issue, quite different and brings different issue more related to the relation between citizens and the elected government rather than the relation between citizens and police officer. Thus, we can identify a clear gap in the literature for the Belgian (and more broadly European cases) about this topic, that this research will seek to fulfill.

Methodology

Data collection

Data is created through semi-structured interviews and seeks to understand the different phenomena discussed by co-constructing knowledge with the participants. Meaning that, while the interview guide (available in appendix) is based on the existing literature and mainly draw from research on women safety in the public space (Tuerkheimer, 2017; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020) and policy feedback on the police and how it relates to the state (Lerman & Weaver, 2014). It also lets participants bring new topics to the interview, such as the section dedicated to the perception of the police in the media that emerged during the pilot interview. This type of data collection is more interested in understanding process, conceptualizations and sense-making rather than direct causal explanations, and thus fits the purpose of this research (Imbert, 2010). These semi-structured interviews are thus driven by a few key themes and open questions that let the interviewee express their own experiences and feelings with large boundaries.

Data analysis

The raw data created by the semi-structured interviews is treated through a two-step analysis. First, thematic analysis is used to seek patterns in the topics discussed during the conversation with the interviewees and code them into the different topics. The interview guide is based on the existing literature covering the different dimensions related to public security, the police and the state. Its coding into topics, however, was done mostly inductively to stick as much as possible to what emerged during the semi-structured interviews and is appropriated since it concerns a subject with limited theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Resulting in an abductive approach that combined both the use of the existing literature and openness to the insights emerging from the semi-structured interviews. Hence, nine main topics emerged:

- Fear of crime and feeling of security: concerns the general feeling of security in the public space, how they assess risks depending on areas, time or the context.
- Conception of the police: concerns how interviewees conceptualize the police institution, what do they consider to assess their trust toward the police and its agents.

- Experience of contact with the police: concerns the concrete interactions citizens have had with the police and what happened during them.
- Conception of the state: How interviewees conceptualize the state, its role and its functioning. What they consider to assess their trust toward politics as a whole.
- Gender-based insecurity: Concerns the feeling of security when it is influenced by gender parameters and mostly sexual violence acts. How they react to these acts and the safety work they undertake.
- Gender (other); dimension linked to gender without being directly linked to the feeling of security in the public space.
- Belonging to a targeted social group: concerns the experience of feeling targeted or discriminated against by the police, institutions or other citizens.
- Perception of the police in the media: concerns the comparison between the perception of the local police and the police through traditional media and social network.
- Other: residual category grouping context and biographic elements that shape individual responses without being related to the other categories.

Afterward, the different narratives related to each subject are analyzed through interpretative analysis. This method seeks to understand how meaning and sense is constructed by the interviewees through their experience's narrative, attitudes and social construction (Wiesner, 2022). Resulting in the construction of three main analysis categories that aggregate the similar categories created earlier: Fear of crime and insecurity, Perception of the police and Perception of the State. Then it allows for the theorization of their sensemaking and to seek why they hold such perceptions and thus connect the findings to the policy feedback literature, which provides a framework fitted to interpret them.

Empirical case

For this research, citizens living in the municipality of Mons have been interviewed. Mons is a typical medium-sized city of Wallonia. Marked by its industrial history and subsequent relative economic decline, Mons' citizens have now an average income of €17,605 per year, slightly below the Walloon average of €19,192(Anberrée, 2023).

The interviews were conducted with 18 individuals: 14 young individuals between the ages of 15 years old and 17 years old. Among which nine women and five men. And four adults public servants; among which three women and one man.

The interview process and recruitment have been supervised by the *"Service de Prévention et Sécurité"* (Safety and Prevention service) of the city. Which is an institution that seeks to develop preventive actions to reduce the insecurity feeling and develop local policies. Among its competences, this institution manages the *"Maisons citoyennes"* (community centers) spread across the municipality and located in deprived areas that are more policed than others. Organizing numerous activities for and with the local population from cooking classes to events aiming to ease access to general practician and healthcare.

The interviews took place in three different community centers during what is called *"Eté solidaire, je suis partenaire"* (Solidarity summer, I'm a partner) which is an operation that hires young people to do beautification work in their neighborhood as their summer student job. Participation in the study was voluntary, though it offered them an extra break from their workday as an incentive to participate. As for the adults, two of them work in a community center and two of them work in the Safety and Prevention service main administration. Every participant were presented the purpose of this research and offered full anonymization. The cooperation with the Safety and Prevention service allowed to interview a specific population that would be otherwise much harder to reach.

Highlighted characteristics

The empirical case of this research presents several key components salient in the literature about the topics of public security, the police and the state. Thus, this research emphasizes three different dimensions; the area of living, custodial citizenry and gender.

First, the area of living provides a clear and concise framework. Economic and crime statistics about a city or a neighborhood are objective data that are easily accessible and thus create a first clear differentiation from other areas. In this research, young citizens live in deprived areas that are expected to have higher crime rates, lower socio-economic index and more policed. Moreover, this aspect is very relevant to begin research about this subject in European cases. Indeed, spatial segregation levels are lower in European cities than in American ones, and furthermore when ethnic or socio-economic concentration are observed, their level is also lower than in US cases (Musterd, 2005). However, it would be false to consider every city perfectly mixed and with no disparities, richer and poorer areas still exist in Europe. Also, the general structure of cities in the USA and in Europe is vastly different (Antipova, 2018). Thus, the importance in the literature of the area of living urges us to study its influence in a very different social and urban configuration.

Secondly, custodial citizenry is a central concept in the policy feedback literature regarding the relationship between deprived communities, the police and the state. Developed in the US context this concept is yet to be applied and used in a European case thus creating a real questioning about its relevancy when studying a non-US context. Its capital importance on citizen's sensemaking described in the theoretical framework made it compulsory to look for when exploring this topic in a new context.

Lastly, as the literature emphasize the influence of being a woman when it comes to the lived experience of public security and their feeling of security in the public space, this dimension is capital for this research. Furthermore, empirically the sample is composed mostly by women, thus one can expect rich and dense gender related narratives during the interviews.

Expectations

Considering the key dimensions studied in this research and the existing literature, three major expectations emerge.

- Custodial citizens have a negative conception of the police institution marked by inequality, stigma and fear toward it.
- Citizens living in disadvantaged neighborhoods have a negative conception of the police institution marked by inequality, stigma and fear toward it.
- Women have a greater fear of crime, greater feeling of insecurity and their relationship with the police and the state is influenced by their gender altered experience.

Analysis

Fear of crime and insecurity

During the interviews, the topic of the feeling of security in the public space produced several key insights.

First, most men, while acknowledging that there are some nuisances to their feeling of security such as people under the influence of alcohol or drugs or that some places can be riskier than others, declare to feel safe in the public space and reported very few negative experience with other citizens.

***"Researcher**: How do you feel in general in the street? Do you feel safe or not really?*

***Young man:** Honestly yeah, there's no problem with that."*

***"Researcher:** How do you feel in the street in general when you go out? Do you feel safe or not really?*

***Young POC man:** Yes, I feel safe."*

On the other hand, female participants bring a totally different light on this subject. During the early moments of the interviews numerous women assess a stronger feeling of insecurity than their male counterparts and put the same emphasis on avoiding certain places but also on avoiding nighttime in the public space.

***"Researcher:** So, how do you feel in general in the street? Do you feel safe? Do you not feel safe?*

***Young woman:** No, not at all.*

***Researcher:** Not at all?*

***Young woman:** No. Actually, during the day, yes. It can be fine, but sometimes at night, no, not at all."*

"Researcher: *How do you feel in general in public space? Do you feel safe or not really?*

Young woman: *It depends where in Mons. Because there are places in Mons, you shouldn't hang around too much like."*

Similarly to other research, women participants express a greater fear of crime when navigating the public space (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022; Johansson & Haandrikman, 2023). However, this worse perception of security in the public space is not the end of the story. As the interviews take place and the discussion focuses on the gender variable and how being a woman affects them in their daily live in the public space, it unfolds how their daily life is shaped by sexual violence.

Young women systematically report numerous negative experiences that can be placed on the continuum of sexual violence. More than being isolated events, their narratives depict daily lives marked by catcalling, street harassment, aggressive request for phone numbers or social media account. Some of them also reported experiences of being followed in the street, individuals publicly masturbating and being raped. On the other hand, concerning the adult women, one out of the three interviewed expressed a similar narrative regarding sexual violence in the public space. The other two, while acknowledging an overall atmosphere marked by those acts, reported very few or no personal experience.

"Young woman: *Well, actually, I was heading to the station to catch my bus. And there was a person who had been drinking, smoking, etc. He followed me all the way to the bus, got on the bus all the way to my home. And in the end, he came and knocked on my door."*

"Young POC woman: *Like Cuesmes' square, well I don't go there anymore because I was raped there, so I don't go there anymore because I know I won't feel safe there"*

"Young POC woman: *Uh no... but there was one time where there was really a person who was... insistent because it happened several times. It was the third time he came to see me. Well, not on the same day actually. But like it was... over three days, well, he kept on..."*

"Young woman: *So, it got on my nerves. And it happens often, actually.*

Researcher: *Ok. Well like... All the time ?... Well I don't know. How often? Like every week or... every day?*

Young woman: *Well honestly, I think I could even say really every day."*

Regarding this subject, the most striking element is how casually women talk about it. With sentences such as:

"Young woman: *Me, I don't turn towards people. For example, if someone whistles at me, I keep going. I act like I didn't hear it. I continue on my way. That's it. And if the person insists, well, I have feet and I know how to run."*

"Young POC woman: *No, no. When I say no, well, I walk faster and I don't pay attention anymore. And if someone talks to me again, I don't pay attention, I keep walking."*

Those excerpts show that being victim of such sexual violence has become something they just deal with daily. So much that when security in the public space is mentioned, some of them don't mention these until street harassment is explicitly mentioned by the interview.

"Researcher: *How do you feel in general in the street when you're out walking around, etc., in public space in terms of your safety? Do you feel good? Do you sometimes feel unsafe?*

Young woman: *I feel good.*

Researcher: *Ok, all the time?*

Young woman: *All the time, all the time.*

...

Researcher: *Ok, have you ever had problems with people in the street or like weird people who come up to you or whistle at you or things like that?*

Young woman: *Yeah*

Researcher: *Ok, can you tell me a bit about it, like, well I don't know if it happens to you often, not often?*

Young woman: *That, when I go out, at least once. At least once when I go out."*

*"**Researcher:** How do you feel, in general, in the street, in public space? Do you feel safe or not so much?*

Young POC woman: *Yes. I feel safe, normal.*

...

Young POC woman: *Well not aggressive but whistling or... "hey do you want to come with me?" well sometimes there are cars that stop in front of me asking "hey can you come with me?" things like that but... Well, it's never been to the point where really extreme where they force me to really... That's it, well, I say no and everything... Well, I just leave and that's it...*

Researcher: *Ok, does it happen often ?*

Young POC woman: *Yes, yes. »*

Being subject to sexual violence has become the norm for most of these women. We can draw a real sense of routine, instead of being directly brought up when covering the insecurity topic these acts have form an integral part of the daily life of being a woman in the public space.

Multiple studies use the term "normalization" when covering the non-exceptional nature of these sexual acts (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023; Hindes & Fileborn, 2023; Hlavka, 2014). For this research, I reject the use of this terminology and will rather use the word "habitualization". Primarily because in these papers the term normalization is used because it reflects a certain degree of acceptance of these acts both by the perpetrators and the victims as part of the dynamics between genders. For example, "*Girls' characterizations of everyday violence paralleled both their assessments that "boys will be boys" and their understanding of harassment as a normal adolescent rite of passage*." In Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women account for Harassment and abuse by Hlavka, (2014). Or "*Participants viewed street harassment as normalized and culturally acceptable, connecting it to the wider acceptance of gendered violence, and misogynist, homophobic, and transphobic attitudes."* In 'Why did he do it? Because he's a Fucking Bloke': Victim Insights into the Perpetration of Street Harassment by Hindes & Fileborn,(2023).

However, during the interviews, women while assessing that it has become an expected part of their life did not use the vocabulary of acceptance toward these acts.

"**Adult woman:** there are times where indeed, you're walking in the street, well being a woman is already annoying, well it's not annoying, but it's a bit complicated even nowadays unfortunately."

Indeed, such as in this excerpt, women feel repulsion toward these acts, and they do not in any way show a degree of acceptance. They only describe what they expect without endorsing it. “Banalization”, “routinization” or “habitualization” thus reflect better their reality. As Goblet & Glowacz (2018) shows, street sexual harassment and sexual violence in the public space has become a commonplace for women. This is reflected in how some women don’t take it into account when describing their safety as they are so used to sexual violence in their routine.

In terms of behavioral adaptation to this hostile environment two major patterns emerge. First, most young women are actively taking actions to avoid as much as possible the sexual violence acts toward them. These embody the concept of safety work discussed earlier ; they restrict their own freedom to adapt to what they experience daily. (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020) Restriction about where and when to go out, what they wear, being alert and acting closed off are the most common change of behavior.

“Young POC woman: *First thing, the times at which I'm going to go out, yes. I don't go out anymore after 8pm. When it starts to get dark, I don't go out. And the way I dress, before, I used to wear dresses ... well, quite short. But now, I don't wear them at all anymore when I go out.”*

"Young POC woman: *Yeah, but it's not just that. How I dress is entirely up to me. Nobody tells me what to do.*

Because I've got... how do I put it... my own rules. I know there are clothes I can't really allow myself to wear at my age.

And also, I've had people close to me go through traumatic things. When they told me about it, that's when I set myself these rules.

I can't go out past a certain time. I can't stay outside alone, things like that."

On the contrary, one woman develops an alternative narrative. She actively refuses to comply with their hostile environment and restricts her freedom. That can be interpreted as a symbolic resistance to illegitimate constraints and norm.

"Young woman: *No, I haven't changed my way of being for men who don't know how to behave. So, I am as I am and I haven't changed my way of being for other people. So, I don't really care about people's opinion, you know."*

Similarly, some of them also report a refusal to change certain aspects but still adapt to others because their safety remains primordial.

"Young woman: *Yeah. Um... How I dress? Not really, no. Because... I'll admit it, I actually enjoy yelling at people. It's genuinely something I'm passionate about. Especially adults... Like people in their thirties, forties... It really cracks me up seeing people still that immature at that age. So honestly, what I wear? I couldn't care less. If I feel like walking around naked, I'll walk around naked. But yeah... I know some friends who really struggle with what they wear because they're scared of being assaulted, but otherwise yes, I think for a few years now I've just walked around with kind of an angry vibe, so people don't talk to me. And sometimes when people still manage to talk to me anyway, it annoys me."*

"Adult woman: *Yeah, so basically, over time, either you go through a bad experience somewhere, or other people tell you about bad experiences they've had in a specific place or at a certain time, and so on. And that's when you start developing avoidance behaviors, not going there alone, or not going there at all, or even taking detours to avoid certain places that*

feel less safe. But when it comes to how I dress, no, I'd never change that. That, I really don't care about. That's just me, personally. I know some people are more careful about it, though."

To sum up, this section shows that women feel a stronger sense of insecurity in the public space than men. This is the case because of the daily sexual violence acts they are subject to. These acts have become an integral part of their daily life and women have banalized these. While not accepting it as a legitimate norm, they accept that it is just their reality. In reaction, most women adopt security behaviors to avoid such acts, few of them at least partially refuse to give up freedom because illegitimate constraints.

Thus, the presence of such banalized sexual violence acts would naturally raise the question of the police presence and reactions toward them and how women are treated regarding these issues.

Trust in the police and experience with police agents

Regarding participants' sensemaking of the police; the most striking and shared conceptualization is the existence of two ideal types of police agents. On one hand, some police agents are viewed as empathetic, understanding, close to the citizens and actually trying to solve their issues.

***"Young POC woman:** Yes, well, no, I think I have a good opinion of the police in general, whether they are female or male police officers. If there's a problem, I wouldn't hesitate at all to call them or anything like that."*

***"Adult woman:** But over the past ten years, I feel like there's been a shift in mindset. Maybe not completely, I don't know, but at least professionally, I've noticed that they're making more of an effort to engage with people and citizens, using perhaps gentler approaches and focusing more on community policing rather than intimidating people. So I think that shift is quite welcome."*

On the other hand, respondents also conceptualized a police institution partially composed with agents that are too detached from people's issues and using too much authority

*"**Young POC woman:** Well, some of them are mean. Like, there are some, you'll tell them things, and they don't care. And there are others, you'll tell them things, and they really take it to heart."*

*"**Young woman:** Because the people who are victims are the ones who get blamed, and in the end the victim is victimized even more, I'd put it that way. And sometimes, well, they don't even respect the laws themselves."*

Those two conceptualizations are not mutually exclusive to one another, and respondents often mention those two types of agents naturally. Such as in this following narrative from a young woman, stressing how multiple experiences shaped a double-edged representation of what is the police.

***"Researcher:** So, based on your experiences, how would you describe your relationship with the police?*

***Young woman:** They've seen me quite a few times already.*

***Researcher:** Okay.*

***Young woman:** Well, sometimes you get officers who are genuinely great. But other times, you come across people who look like they don't even want to be there. It's like we're just bothering them.*

And they don't really care about our problems.

***Researcher:** Okay. So in those situations, you feel...?*

***Young woman:** When I meet officers who understand or at least try to solve the problem, or really try to understand what's going on and find a solution... even if they can't solve it, the fact that they try to understand already makes a difference.*

First, I feel safe because they're there. And second, I feel better because they're actually trying to understand me. That alone makes you feel better. But sometimes you get police officers who don't even try to understand. They just wait for an adult to show up. Or they arrive, ask

whether I'm having a problem with someone else, tell the other person to leave, and then I go my own way. With officers like that, I don't feel safe at all."

When forming their conceptualization of the different type of police agents, interviewees rely on the different components identified by Mastrofski et al., (2007) such as being available and accessible, predictable, responsive, competent, respectful and fair.

However such as Maguire & Johnson (2010) shows, citizen do not use each component independently. Indeed, during the interviews it seemed that most respondents blended the different aspects to elaborate their general conception and their evaluation of the police as a public service.

As mentioned in the narrative of the young woman when she explains that sometimes police agents "wait for an adult to show up", the feeling of not being recognized as a legitimate interlocutor by the police becomes clear. Throughout the interviews with young women, we can observe that this feeling is broadly shared. They emphasize two key ideas, one being that they are not taken seriously because they are too young; the police would not seek to resolve their issues as agents would consider them unimportant and take them lightly. Secondly, this feeling of being illegitimate before the police materialized by the complaint filing process that requires the presence of a parent or legal guardian. Therefore, their subjective perception of illegitimacy is reinforced through experiences they (or their social circle) have with the police.

(When discussing her relationship with the police)

***"Young woman:** I wouldn't say cold, but I have the impression that I'm not taken seriously… like when I tell them something, I have the impression that they see me, yeah, like a 16-year-old teenager having a meltdown you know.*

***"Young woman:** Well, they took my complaint, but that's all. Well, I couldn't file a complaint myself. So it was my parents who actually filed the complaint."*

*"**Young POC woman:** Since I'm young, I just think to myself, they're not going to believe me anyway, they'll always assume it's like, 'oh, teenagers, they like causing trouble, they like showing off, just looking for attention,' that kind of thing. So I figure it's better to just keep it to myself."*

As for their male counterparts, this feeling remained absent from the interviews. Two plausible explanations emerge; first, the interaction with the police could be shaped by structural gender discrimination against women. Such as when an adult woman reported being victim of misogyny when going to a police station.

***"Adult woman:** I felt a bit victim of misogyny from the guy taking my statement. So I walk in, and the police officer receives me with a condescending attitude. I don't know why. He says "yes uhh" as if I were a bit dumb or something. I can't really explain it, but that's how it felt. And then he goes "yes about your stolen computer", I describe what happened, the place where I lost it, etc. I actually thought it had been stolen. And then he asks me "So what do you do ? Are you a secretary ?" "No, I'm a criminologist" .... And honestly, I didn't appreciate his attitude, like "oh, you're a woman, you must be a secretary"*

This argument is in line with the existing literature stressing how women's voices are often undermined and invisibilized when reporting their issues to the police, especially when it concerns sexual violence (Tuerkheimer, 2017; Turner & Swaine, 2023). Another explanation would rather concern the sample of participants involved. Only five out of the fourteen young participants were male, and solely one of them had a direct striking experience with police agents. Thus, the lack of similar feeling of illegitimacy could be specific to this small sample and might appear in broader research. Additionally, the restriction concerning the complaint filing process concerns is not gender-specific and concerns all genders. During the interviews, young women did not address explicitly this issue as gender specific. Similarly to their feeling of insecurity (which despite being shaped by gender inequalities were not always directly identified as such) this may not be salient to them because they are used to it. Thus, one must remain cautious about interpreting this result and attributing it to a youngster's issue or at the

intersection of gender and age. Although gender seems to remain a crucial factor concerning this issue.

Furthermore, young people tend to identify themselves as a targeted group by the police. Indeed, not only do they feel illegitimate before the police, but they also feel that the police discriminate against them through age-based profiling and disproportionate aggressive treatment.

*"**Young woman:** They don't really explain much to us. But every time they show up, it's just to play tough cop, you know? It's just to stop you. Some of them have even hit young people."*

***"Adult woman:** Also, when I was younger, since a lot of my friends had experienced police violence at some point, seeing police officers actually made me nervous — I'd stress out wondering if they were going to be aggressive. And it's true that back when I was a student, I used to go to a lot of festivals, and sometimes, for them, everyone is potentially guilty of having drugs on them. And so they're very aggressive with festival-goers."*

Additionally, most of the youngsters who belong to ethnic minorities reported that the police discriminate people of color through violent treatment, ethnic profiling and less credit accorded to their testimonies. This insight is consistent with previous research that documented similar ethnic profilin g and differential treatment toward ethnic minorities by the Belgian police (De Vocht et al., 2024).

***"Young POC woman:** Like if something happens between me and someone else, I don't really want to bring up skin color, because I find that... but generally speaking, they're going to side with the other person over me, like they're going to believe the other person more than me."*

***"Young POC woman**: Also, I feel like sometimes there's just... I don't know. Sometimes they're racist. Some of them are racist.*

***Researcher:** Okay. Feel free to... I mean... If you want, you could expand on that a bit... Like, does that happen often, seeing...*

***Young POC woman:** Yeah, police officers who Sometimes they show a bit of favoritism, I think."*

Moreover, the accumulation of being young and belonging to an ethnic minority further aggravate how individuals perceive they own credibility before the police.

***"Researcher:** And when you say you would be directly guilty, why do you think that?*

***Young POC woman:** Because, first of all, I'm not in my own country. I'm still a teenager and I don't think the police can easily believe a teenager. They'll just say she provoked it or whatever. There's no credibility there, so, no."*

***"Young woman:** Me personally, no, but I have friends who, yeah, they always get caught and beaten up by the police every time, either because they're Arab or because they're young kids who don't want to get in the car."*

Whether the sense of being targeted is due to age or skin color, it creates a preemptive assumption that they will be seen as guilty. Directly influencing how trustful they are toward police agents and their willingness to initiate contact with the police if they ever need it.

***"Young woman:** They always have a threatening look and it makes you feel a bit uncomfortable, like if I had a problem, I wouldn't go toward them because they make me uncomfortable."*

As seen in the literature, direct personal experience is not necessary for citizens to make sense of certain phenomena. Their perception is also influenced by event they witnessed as well as by experiences of other individuals they can relate to or share (at least partly) their identity. Demonstrating that indirect exposition also contributes to the formation of collective representations, expectations and beliefs shaping citizens' attitude in their daily lives.

During the interviews, many respondents identified a discrepancy between how police agents treat misdemeanors such as noise disturbance or drug consumption and how they treat sexual violence offenses or relational and intrafamilial issues. More than just a difference of treatment, individuals understand this dynamic as an unfair voluntary prioritization of certain matters over sexual violence acts.

"Young woman: *I mean, I don't do anything, it's just not my thing, you know, I just don't like them. But when it's someone who smokes weed, things like that, maybe that's also very bad, you can't smoke, no no you can't. But first deal with the rapes and after deal with that. Rapes are worse than that. They leave that aside, they ask about the outfit and all that, things like that, but I don't understand. Because I have a friend, it's none of my business, but she went to the police, and they just asked her how she was dressed, like it was normal, like she shouldn't have gone out at that hour and all that. That's not really okay though."*

The differentiated responsiveness is unequivocally perceived negatively by the individuals who addressed this issue. Thus, we can observe two different processes leading to the same feeling for young women. Sexual violence acts are viewed as under prioritized by the police, and young women feel that their voice is being invisibilized making them feel unheard, dismissed and unprotected.

As for the comparison between participants' perception of the police through their lived experience and in the media. Those who actually encounter police-related content on their social media feed and in traditional media articulate a cognitive process of differentiation between what they lived and what is represented in media. Most of them argued that the representation in the media is biased whether favorably or against the police institution

"Young man: *There have also already been a few videos, but... Like, police officers getting angry and things like that, but at the time, they never show the whole video. The internet is the internet, you know... The internet is bullshit."*

"Young woman: *Honestly, on social media it's worse than in real life, actually, because you see things there that, well, people from outside may not have seen, even inside homes and everything. I mean, there are already people who sometimes film things for no reason, like for a family argument they turn the whole house upside down, things like that. Whereas on TV, well, they often put them on a pedestal; they're the heroes of the city and everything"*

Hence, their perception of the police as a lived institution is not much influenced by the representation of the police in social or traditional media because they separate the two different conceptualizations.

Conception of the state

Among most young individuals, regardless of their gender, the most striking finding concerning this section is that the notions of state, government and politics are very distant and vague. When asked about their conceptualization of the state of the government in Belgium, the most common response was that they had little to no idea about it. And expressing variable levels of trust toward the state. Thus, suggesting that classical politics is not salient for those young citizens.

"Young POC woman : *Honestly, I really don't know; I'm not really interested in politics. I don't really know, I have no idea"*

"Young man: *not much. I don't pay much attention to what's going on with the government"*

"Young woman: *Well, I don't really hear much about the state because, well... you know, I'm not often at home with my father. I'm mostly on my own, or I do things on my own. So, well, I don't talk about it much, and we don't really talk about it a lot with the people I talk to. So..."*

Very few of the young respondents expressed stronger opinions on politics. When politics was mentioned, they primarily had negative feelings toward it even if they had no clear conception of what the state or the government could be. Furthermore, they actually actively reject politics as they consider it a source of trouble and perceive politicians negatively.

"Young woman: *"Uh, lots of things... but not necessarily positive ones. For example, when someone says politics, I think more about the far right, the far left, ministers who are always telling lies and all that, and lots of things. For example, the King, I don't know, I've never seen him—well, actually, I saw him once in La Louvière, he was saying hello to people, and then..." shrugs. "But otherwise, I've never heard anything about King Philippe. He doesn't do anything."*

"Young POC woman: *So, I avoid politics because I hear a lot of stories about people who are far-right, far-left, sorry, I don't know. I feel like it causes problems."*

"Young POC woman : *Politics in general is kind of frightening, I'd say. It's not very trustworthy. I mean, … Actually, … People can show you the good side of someone while hiding all of their bad sides. I don't know how to explain it. So, actually, people in politics are really... I don't know. Sometimes they can be nice. And then suddenly, everything... They're opportunistic, I feel."*

Regarding this subject, two young individuals' narratives stand out. Two siblings that arrived in Belgium recently from an authoritarian country shed a much more positive light on Belgian politics. While the concepts of the state or government were also vague for them, the comparison between the two countries they had lived in made them express much more trust toward the state as an abstract concept. Indeed, they spontaneously cited the democratic features of Belgium as positive factors influencing their trust. This finding is in line with previous research examining why immigrants coming from authoritarian countries exhibit higher level of trust in public institution in a democratic country, especially during their early time in the country (Röder & Mühlau, 2012).

*"**Young POC woman:** Because... Back home, when you talk like that, they put you in prison, straight away. There is no freedom of expression. When you talk about politics, they lock you up. First of all, we have a president who has spent his whole life in power. He doesn't want to leave. We've had enough. But anyway... Back home, when... Not only is there no employment. And when you are unemployed, you can be unemployed to the point of dying. Nobody cares. There is no... There is no CPAS. There is no insurance. There is nothing. Whereas here, there is insurance. They pay you when you are unemployed. And you can speak freely. Honestly, if we were living where we used to live, we wouldn't be talking like this anymore. So, I say that I'm still grateful to be here. It's still a good thing. I changed my environment. Honestly, over there, it was hell."*

In comparison, the adult interviewees had much more articulated conceptualization of the state and opinion on politics. In this sample, they all work as public servant which greatly influenced how they perceive politics as their jobs directly rely on them or as one of the respondents would phrase "they are our bosses".

Although the state-related concepts seem vague and distant for the young interviewees, the street level bureaucracy on the other hand is better conceptualized and perceived positively, particularly for those who had direct interactions with street-level institutions (excluding the police). Mainly, their perception is shaped by both their personal experience but also more abstractly by the idea that those institutions exist for the purpose of helping people. Whether it concerns welfare or helping citizens in danger like the firefighters, these institutions are seen as inherently positive. Thus, opposing the much more abstract nature of the state, and its very variable perception.

(When speaking about the community center)

***"Young man:** Here, I think it's great. Honestly, the educators, the trainers, etc."*

***"Young POC woman:** The CPAS is really there to help people, whoever they are... Whereas with politicians, sometimes, it feels like things don't really work that way. It can be contradictory. They... I don't really know how to explain it. You know what I mean?"*

Interpretation

The analysis has shown how young citizens and particularly young women conceptualize and make sense of the public security, the police and the state. They express articulated perceptions of the different topics based on their personal and vicarious experience as well as broader collective representations. These citizens do not only react to the public institutions related to the topics addressed during the interviews by expressing simple opinions or evaluations, but they actively make sense of the meaning the institutions convey. As the policy feedback lens indicates, by their actions, institutions communicate about who the citizens are, who is worth protecting and prioritizing and who is recognized at all.

The following section interprets the different sensemaking expressed by the interviewees and ties them to the policy feedback literature interpretative effect and most importantly the normative one.

Firstly, regarding gender related issues four major findings stand out; (1) young women are subject to sexual violence routinely in the public space and such acts have been banalized (2) young women operate behavioral change to minimize the potential of being sexually aggressed and (3) young women feel that the sexual violence acts directed toward them are underprioritized by the police and (4) when they actually report these acts to the police, they often feel unheard.

These narratives have deep influences on how young women perceive how the state considers them. As a vulnerable social group targeted by continuous acts of violence, the lack of responsiveness from the police to their daily concerns conveys the message that they are not worth allocating the appropriate resources to actually deal with their problematics. Consequently, this feeling of being abandoned by the state regarding their safety makes them adopt strategies and behavior called safety work (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Sexual violence is a daily threat that they have come to assimilate to their routine, becoming an integrated part of what being a woman in the public space is. Thus, while actively protesting against its normalization, they feel that enduring it and adapting to it is expected from them. Therefore, they constitute a social group forced to actively restrict their own freedom in order to remain safe, a burden that signals their diminished citizen status.

Gender alone is not the end of the story; the intersection of gender and age further deepens this diminished sense of citizenship. Being underage affects their self-perception of

citizenship both through formal and informal ways. Formally, not being able to file complaints by themselves truly affects their self-perception of citizenship. Meaning that this specific policy has the normative effect of conveying to young people that they are not full citizens yet. Tying to the concept of partial children citizenship, explaining that this kind of policies refrain youngsters to participate fully in our society and that they are not real citizens but rather only becoming ones (James, 2011). Moreover, more diffusely the same logic of not being a legitimate interlocutor before the police is also shared through their informal contacts with police agents, often being dismissed, not being taken seriously and even being targeted further deepen the perception of diminished citizenship.

While negative resentment due to how they are treated by the police is shared among young women, most of them do not expand this feeling to the whole state. Two major explanations regarding this cognitive process emerge. First, most of them have little to no conceptualization of what the state is and make no particular link between the police and the state. The diminished feeling of citizenship is thus almost entirely attributed to how the police deal with them and underprioritize their specific problematic and is not generalized to the whole state. Secondly, we can observe a mediating effect due to the contact with other salient state institutions. Indeed, many of them report multiple interactions with other state institutions that are largely deemed as very positive. They perceive many of the other street-level bureaucracy institution as inherently positive, existing with the purpose of helping citizens through welfare and various services.

Likewise, we can observe that the lived state through interactions with multiple institutions influence their perception of how the state as a whole consider them. Thus, the feeling created by the police by how they handle women safety and contacts with youngsters is not generalized to the whole state and remain a perception directed toward this specific institution. It must be noted that this phenomenon is also influenced by the lack of conceptualization of the abstract state by those young citizens.

Taken together, these findings show that regarding the domain of public security among young women, the policy feedback operates as specific to an institution rather than a signal conveyed by the state as a whole The most important normative feedback, transmitted through both contacts with the police and formal policy design, constructs young women as a social group whose safety is not prioritized nor protected, and whose voice is often met with disbelief. Producing a diminished sense of citizenship influenced by both gender and age. Yet, this normative message remains largely confined to their relationship with the police and is not

generalized to the broader state. Either due to the lack of conceptual link between the police and the abstract state or because of contacts with other street-level institutions creating competing feedback that is converse to what the police conveys.

Discussion

This research found out that when it comes to young citizens sensemaking of the public security policyscape, three major theoretical results can be drawn. First, for young women their perception is primarily influenced by how sexual violence acts affects them in their daily lives and how their problematic is under prioritized by the police leading to a diminished sense of citizenship. Secondly, being underage directly influences how the police interact with them both formally and informally, deepening their diminished sense of citizenship. Thirdly, the feeling of diminished citizenship is present only when interacting with the police and not the other state's institutions or the state as a whole.

These results vastly differ from what Lerman and Weaver found during their research for the book "Arresting Citizenship: The democratic consequences of American crime control" (2014). Indeed, while both of our research studied individuals that can be considered custodial citizens, their status as such seems not salient in this research. First, gender related dimensions are much more relevant to the participants of this research, thus eclipsing the importance of belonging to custodial citizenry. Same goes with how their age influences their interactions with the police. Secondly, even though this research also took place in policed communities, citizens' perception of the police is not as negative as the one held by US individuals. Lastly, citizens' interaction with the state are not restricted to interactions with the police. Indeed, they encounter multiple other institutions during their lives, the police is thus only one among the others.

This research contributes to the policy feedback literature in two main ways. First, this literature is still largely dominated by US based cases and thus lack European insights. Secondly, it expands the use of the normative feedback to a policy domain that remained unexplored with this specific theoretical framework until now.

Turning to another aspect, for following research about sexual violence acts, sexual harassment in the public space and related dimensions, I ought to dismiss the use of the word "normalization" when it comes to explain how women are used to endure them daily. In fact, in the literature and semantically, this word preserves a certain sense of acceptance by women toward these acts. However, as seen during the interviews, while they expect these to happen daily, they remain revulsed by them unequivocally. Thus, I encourage the use of a new terminology regarding this cognitive process such as banalization, routinization or

habitualization that have been already used in few other research, but whose use remain rather scarce.

While this research allows for a deep understanding of the interviewees' representation and sensemaking through extensive semi-structured interviews aimed at theoretical generalization. This research studies a specific population and has a limited sample size. Therefore, it lacks quantitative generalization to other populations whose sensemaking might be shaped by different experiences. For this reason, it would be relevant for further research to study the same subject with other specific populations to broaden the array of documented sensemaking processes and then conduct quantitative research to seek how these are shared among a greater scale sample. Moreover, the influence of my positionality as a male researcher remains unknown, while female participants did not appear reluctant to share their sensitive experiences; one must question how they might have interacted with a female researcher. At the same time, being a male who does not experience sexual violence in my daily life may have offered a different perspective regarding these issues.

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Appendix

Interview guide

THEME	SOUS-THEME	RELANCE
Sentiment de sécurité dans l'espace public	- Comment vous sentez vous en général dans la rue (l'espace public) ? - Est-ce que vous pouvez me raconter si vous avez déjà eu des problèmes avec d'autres citoyens dans la rue ? - Est-ce que ça vous est déjà arrivé de vous faire siffler, appeler de façon dérangeante, accoster agressivement ou directement harcelée dans la rue ? Est-ce que vous pouvez me raconter comment ça s'est déroulé ?	- Est-ce que vous avez ce sentiment tout le temps ou plutôt dans des situations particulières ? est-ce que vous pouvez me les décrire ? - Comment s'est fini cet incident ? Est-ce que d'autres personnes sont intervenues ? La police ? - Est-ce que cela vous arrive régulièrement ? Est-ce que ce type de comportement vous ont forcé à changer certaines choses quand vous vous baladez ? Comportement, façon de s'habiller, l'heure à laquelle vous sortez ?
Conception du gouvernement	- Si je vous parle d'état ou de gouvernement, qu'est-ce que ces notions représentent pour vous ? - Avez-vous déjà eu des contacts avec l'état ? quelle était leur nature ? Est-ce que vous pouvez me raconter comment cela s'est passé ? - Comment décrieriez-vous la relation que vous avez avec la politique belge ? - Est-ce que vous diriez que vous avez plutôt confiance dans l'état belge ou êtes-vous plutôt méfiante ?	- Quels sont les plus marquants ? En avez-vous régulièrement ? - Par exemple, concernant les élections de Juin qui approche, est-ce que vous vous êtes déjà forgé une opinion ?
Rapport à la police	- Est-ce que vous avez déjà dû appeler la police pour vous ou pour quelqu'un d'autre ? - Comment décririez-vous votre relation avec la police ? - Avez-vous des expériences marquantes avec la police qui vous sont arrivées dans l'espace public ? Pouvez-vous me les raconter ?	- Comment ça s'est passé au téléphone ? Puis quand ils sont arrivés ? Est-ce qu'ils ont pu régler le souci pour lequel vous les appeliez ? - Quand est-il si l'on parle de votre quartier et de ses besoins ?

	- Est-ce que vous pensez que la police comprend vos besoins, vos préoccupations ? Quand est-il si l'on parle de votre quartier et de ses besoins ? - De facon plus générale, quelle est votre avis concernant la police ? Est-ce que vous ressentez la même chose pour toute la police dans son ensemble ? (selon la réponse voir si c'est plus lié aux agents de proximité ou à la police dans les médias ou autre)	

NB: these questions are written in French since it is the language used during the interview.

NB 2: The gender issues related questions shall only be asked to citizens who identify as a woman.

Due to their length, the interviews transcript are available in a separate file.