

28th ECSS Anniversary Congress, Paris/France, 4-7 July 2023

A longitudinal study on exercise habits and mental health among Swedish police students

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Introduction

In Sweden, police education should promote students' physical activity and mental health. According to national goals, police students should be provided with sufficient conditions to develop and maintain advantageous exercise habits and tools to handle various mentally and physically demanding tasks. The national goals also state that students' physical fitness must be better at graduation than what the requirements are for admission (see Krugly et al., 2022). Although the improvement of students' physical fitness and mental health are national goals, there is a general lack of knowledge regarding: 1) police students physical and mental health, especially from a Swedish perspective; and 2) how well police education promotes students' level of physical activity during education. Against this background, the aim is to explore police students' mental health and level of physical activity during police education in Sweden.

Methods

The data derives from the largest project in Sweden on police students' physical and mental health, and consists of longitudinal data on police students answers of a self-rated questionnaire about exercise habits and mental health (N = 785). The data used in this study was gathered between 2019–2021, and consisted of four data collection points, from two police educations in Sweden. The analysis was conducted in two steps. First, exploratory- and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to create scales for mental health orientation. Second, these scales, together with the variable exercise habits, were used as outcome variables in t-tests, X2 test and ANOVA. Effect size measurements were calculated and interpreted based on established guidelines.

Results

The results show high psychometric support for two scales named positive health orientation and negative health orientation. Based on the scales and the variable of exercise habits, three primarily results emerge: 1) the levels of physical training for men decrease during education; 2) there are gender differences showing that women have a more negative health orientation; and, 3) the positive mental health orientation decreases during education for both men and women.

Discussion

Swedish police education should prepare students for physically and mentally demanding work. However, as this study concludes, this tends to not be the case, especially given that both the level of physical activity and the positive mental health orientation decrease during education. This raises questions on whether the Swedish police education is doing "enough" to provide the students with adequate conditions for improving their mental and physical health.

Krugly, S., Bjärsholm, D., Jansson, A., Rosendal Hansen, A., Hansson, O., Brehm, K., Datmo, A., Hafsteinsson Östenberg, A., & Vikman, J. (2022). A retrospective study of physical fitness and mental health among police students in Sweden. *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles*. doi.org/10.1177/0032258X221089576

Topic: Physical Activity Promotion

Presentation: Poster

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