



Collaboration

GROUNDLED LEADERSHIP IN THE GUARDIA CIVIL: A PILOT STUDY IN TERRITORIAL UNITS

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Summary: 1. INTRODUCTION. 1.1. Secure-Base Leadership. 1.2. Model of work demands and resources. 1.3. Theoretical model and hypotheses. 2. METHOD. 2.1. Participants and procedure. 2.2. Measures. 2.3. Data analysis. 3. RESULTS. 4. DISCUSSION. 4.1. Limitations and future research directions. 5. CONCLUSIONS. 6. REFERENCES.

Abstract: Leadership is a fundamental element for the effective functioning of police organisations, particularly in contexts characterised by high levels of demand, uncertainty and continuous exposure to stressful situations. In such environments, the ability of leaders to foster trust, cohesion and psychological safety amongst their subordinates is crucial for both professional performance and staff wellbeing. The Secure Base Leadership (SBL) model, grounded in attachment theory, proposes that leaders can act as supportive and guiding figures who foster the personal and professional development of their colleagues. This approach integrates the role of emotional support with the need to meet objectives, creating a leadership style suited to hierarchical organisations operating under high operational pressure. This pilot, cross-sectional and exploratory study, using questionnaires administered to Guardia Civil officers in different units across the Aragón region, analyses the presence of behaviours associated with SLB in territorial units of Guardia Civil and explores their relationship with relevant psychosocial variables such as *work engagement*, *burnout* and perceived job performance. In the sample analysed, the perception of LBS was positively associated with *work engagement* and job performance, and negatively associated with *burnout*. These results suggest that LBS may constitute a relevant organisational resource in contexts of high work demands. The preliminary findings point to the advisability of further exploring the incorporation of the LBS model into the training and development of managers within the institution.

Resumen: El liderazgo constituye un elemento fundamental para el funcionamiento eficaz de las organizaciones policiales, especialmente en contextos con elevados niveles de exigencia, incertidumbre y exposición continuada a situaciones de estrés. En estos entornos la capacidad del mando para generar confianza, cohesión y seguridad psicológica en sus subordinados resulta determinante tanto para el rendimiento profesional como para el bienestar del personal. El modelo de Liderazgo de Base Segura (LBS), fundamentado en la teoría del apego, propone que quienes lideran pueden actuar como figuras de apoyo y referencia que favorecen el desarrollo personal y profesional de sus colaboradores. Este enfoque integra la función de apoyo emocional con la exigencia orientada al cumplimiento de objetivos, configurando un estilo de liderazgo adecuado para organizaciones jerarquizadas y sometidas a elevada presión operativa. El presente estudio piloto, transversal y exploratorio, mediante cuestionarios aplicados a guardias civiles en diferentes unidades de la Zona de Aragón, analiza la presencia de comportamientos asociados al LBS en unidades territoriales de la Guardia Civil y explora su relación con variables psicosociales relevantes como el *work engagement*, el *burnout* y el desempeño laboral percibido. En la muestra analizada, la percepción de LBS se relacionó positivamente con el *work engagement* y el desempeño laboral, y negativamente con el *burnout*. Estos resultados sugieren que el LBS puede constituir un recurso organizacional relevante en contextos de elevada demanda laboral. Los hallazgos, de carácter preliminar, apuntan a la conveniencia de seguir explorando la incorporación del modelo de LBS en la formación y desarrollo de mandos dentro de la institución.

Keywords: Secure Base Leadership, Guardia Civil, *work engagement*, *burnout*, police leadership.

Palabras clave: Liderazgo de Base Segura, Guardia Civil, *work engagement*, *burnout*, liderazgo policial.

ABBREVIATIONS

SBL: Secure Base Leadership.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its creation in 1844, the Guardia Civil has played a central role in public security in Spain, characterised by its territorial deployment and its proximity to the public, particularly in rural and hard-to-reach areas. This organisational model involves a high degree of reliance on close-knit hierarchical structures and intense relational dynamics, where leadership plays a critical role in both operational effectiveness and the internal cohesion of units (Del Moral, 2023).

Historically, leadership in the Guardia Civil has been underpinned by a strongly codified system of values, with particular emphasis on setting an example, discipline and moral authority. The founding Charter of 1845, drawn up by the Duke of Ahumada, established a model of command based on honour, integrity and exemplary conduct, shaping a form of authority underpinned not only by formal hierarchy but also by moral recognition on the part of subordinates (Martínez-Viqueira, 2019). This approach remains in force today through the Code of Conduct (Royal Decree 176/2022), reinforcing the ethical dimension of leadership as a key element for institutional legitimacy and social trust (Del Moral, 2023; Martínez-Viqueira, 2024).

This regulatory model is implemented within an operational context characterised by frequent exposure to situations of risk, uncertainty and time pressure. The territorial units of Guardia Civil face high demands linked to decision-making under critical conditions, incident management and direct interaction with the public, placing increased demands on leadership skills, emotional regulation and team coordination (De la Cruz, 2024). From the perspective of the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, this type of high-demand environment requires the presence of organisational resources that mitigate burnout and promote optimal team functioning (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017).

In this context, the Secure Base Leadership (SBL) model offers a potentially useful theoretical framework for analysing the relationship between leadership, psychosocial well-being and organisational functioning in policing contexts. This approach, grounded in attachment theory, conceptualises the leader as a figure who simultaneously provides emotional support in situations of stress or uncertainty (a safe haven) and psychological security to explore, learn and face challenges (a secure base) (Molero et al., 2019; Moriano, 2025). From the perspective of the JD-R model, LBS has been conceptualised as an organisational resource associated both with the motivational process—reflected in higher levels of work engagement—and with the process of health deterioration, linked to lower levels of burnout (Laguía et al., 2025; Molero et al., 2019; Moriano et al., 2021).

Despite its explanatory potential, research on LBS in policing contexts remains limited, and is virtually non-existent in the case of Guardia Civil, particularly within territorial units. This gap is particularly significant, given that in these contexts relational proximity, interdependence at work and exposure to critical situations could increase the importance of leadership on key variables such as work engagement, burnout and job performance.

Therefore, the aim of this pilot study is to conduct an exploratory analysis of perceptions of LBS in territorial units of Guardia Civil within the Aragón region, based on subordinates' assessments of their superiors. It also examines the relationship between LBS and key indicators of organisational functioning—specifically work engagement,

burnout and perceived job performance—as well as the direct and indirect mechanisms that mediate these relationships within the framework of the proposed model.

This pioneering research within the Guardia Civil aims to provide a novel approach, exploring the potential applicability of the LBS model in police contexts characterised by high operational demands. It also seeks to contribute to the generation of empirical evidence on the relationship between leadership and relevant psychosocial variables in the field of public safety.

1.1. SECURE BASE LEADERSHIP

The Secure Base Model (SBM) is a positive and ethical leadership model, empirically grounded in scientific psychology, which articulates principles of exemplary behaviour, care for those in one's charge and the building of trust (Moriano, 2025). From this perspective, SL is not a concept alien to the institutional culture of Guardia Civil; rather, it connects naturally with its founding tradition of moral authority, the protection of subordinates and the exercise of leadership based on recognition and legitimacy.

From a theoretical standpoint, LBS stems from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), adapted to the organisational context to explain how those in leadership roles influence their teams' emotional regulation, stress coping and behavioural patterns. Within this framework, a leader's psychological availability, capacity for empathy and sensitivity to the needs of those under their charge are not merely ancillary skills, but central mechanisms through which team engagement, stress coping and performance are influenced in demanding situations (Laguía et al., 2025; Molero et al., 2019; Moriano et al., 2021).

In conceptual terms, LBS is defined by the leader's ability to forge secure relational bonds through closeness, whilst simultaneously providing support in situations of stress or uncertainty (a 'safe haven') and facilitating exploration, risk-taking and autonomous development (a 'secure base'). In the context of Guardia Civil, this dual function takes on particular significance due to the combination of operational demands, hierarchical structure and relational proximity that characterises the territorial units, where decision-making under conditions of uncertainty and autonomous action in the field are commonplace.

The specific contribution of the LBS compared to other established leadership models lies in the fact that it focuses not only on behaviours such as inspiration, morality, authenticity or service (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Bass, 1985; Brown et al., 2005; Greenleaf, 1977), but also on the secure bond that can underpin them. Drawing on attachment theory, LBS makes explicit a basic assumption that has often remained implicit: every leadership relationship generates a bond—whether secure or insecure—which determines how people interpret authority, cope with demands, regulate stress and feel capable of taking on responsibilities. Furthermore, from the perspective of the ethics of care, this bond implies that leadership cannot be reduced to the impartial application of rules, procedures or formal criteria, but must also take into account the specific consequences that decisions have on those in one's care. From this perspective, caring involves addressing their needs in a context-sensitive manner, recognising situations of pressure or vulnerability, acting with empathy, and responding with sensitivity and responsibility when the leader has a genuine capacity to guide, support or protect (Ciulla,

2009; Gilligan, 1982). In this sense, the dynamics of attachment and care proposed by the LBS can be understood as a meta-model or common factor in leadership practices.

The available empirical evidence, in both civilian and military contexts, shows that LBS is consistently associated with higher levels of work engagement, resilience, organisational identification and performance, as well as lower levels of stress, burnout and organisational dehumanisation (Laguía et al., 2024; Lobato et al., 2024; Molero et al., 2019; Moriano et al., 2021; Navas-Jiménez et al., 2024, 2025). These findings suggest that LBS may play a key role as an organisational resource, by simultaneously contributing to the activation of motivational processes and the reduction of emotional exhaustion. This dual function aligns with the JD-R model, which distinguishes between motivational processes and health-compromising processes as explanatory pathways for work performance (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). From this perspective, LBS could influence variables such as work engagement and burnout, providing a suitable theoretical framework for analysing its direct and indirect impact on work performance.

1.2. THE JOB DEMANDS AND RESOURCES MODEL

The JD-R model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, 2017) provides a particularly useful theoretical framework for analysing well-being and performance in work contexts characterised by high levels of demand, such as that of Guardia Civil. This model posits that individuals' functioning at work depends on the dynamic balance between the demands of the job and the resources available to cope with them.

Specifically, the model distinguishes between two fundamental processes. On the one hand, the process of health deterioration, whereby sustained exposure to high demands increases the risk of burnout. On the other hand, the motivational process, through which workplace resources promote work engagement and, ultimately, job performance (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Schaufeli and Taris, 2014). This dual pathway helps to explain why, in highly demanding environments, high-performing profiles coexist with others characterised by emotional exhaustion, fatigue and disengagement.

In the context of Guardia Civil, job demands include exposure to risk, time pressure, decision-making under uncertainty and the management of emotionally intense situations. These conditions, when sustained over a prolonged period, may be associated with an increased risk of deterioration in psychological and physical well-being (Violanti et al., 2017).

This study focuses on the posts in the Aragón region, territorial units primarily dedicated to crime prevention and the provision of public safety services, including the receipt and processing of complaints and the investigation of cases (Directorate-General of Guardia Civil, General Order 25, 2023, p. 38). These units form the backbone of the territory and provide a community-based service to the public; as such, they are frequently called upon to respond to a variety of incidents, such as reports of burglary, forest fires, public order disturbances, interpersonal conflicts or humanitarian assistance. These specific work demands help to contextualise the professional environment in which the LBS is analysed. However, given the pilot nature of the research, these demands were not included as empirical variables in the model analysed.

Among organisational resources, leadership occupies a central position, as it influences the way in which individuals interpret, cope with and regulate the demands of the service. In this regard, recent research has begun to conceptualise certain leadership styles as key resources within the JD-R model, insofar as they can contribute both to reducing the impact of demands and to triggering motivational processes. Specifically, it has been found that LBS acts as an organisational resource associated with a reduction in burnout and the promotion of work engagement (Laguía et al., 2025; Molero et al., 2019; Moriano et al., 2021; Navas-Jiménez et al., 2024, 2025).

Consequently, this study adopts the JD-R model as a theoretical framework to examine the role of LBS as an organisational resource within the Guardia Civil. From this perspective, a model is proposed in which LBS is related to burnout and work engagement and, through these, to perceived job performance.

1.3. THEORETICAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

This study integrates attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) as applied to leadership and the JD-R model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, 2017) with the aim of conducting a preliminary examination of the mechanisms through which LBS might be related to well-being and performance in territorial units of Guardia Civil. This integration allows leadership to be conceptualised not only as a management style, but as an organisational resource that modulates individuals' responses to the demands of the operational context.

In line with this approach, it is proposed that LBS may help to reduce *burnout* by providing a relational environment that facilitates emotional regulation and the perception of support, and that, at the same time, it may enhance *work engagement* by promoting active involvement, confidence in one's actions and achievement orientation. In this way, leadership does not act solely through a direct effect on perceived performance, but can also do so through its influence on these intermediate psychological states.

In this model, *work engagement* is understood as the central manifestation of the motivational process proposed by the JD-R, emerging when individuals have sufficient resources to cope with the demands of work. It is defined as a positive and satisfying work-related state, characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002), and reflects an active form of well-being associated with high levels of energy, involvement and persistence in work activities (Salanova et al., 2005). Empirical evidence consistently shows that *work engagement* is positively related to performance and acts as a key mechanism linking work resources to positive organisational outcomes (Bakker, 2011; Bakker et al., 2014; Christian et al., 2011).

Conversely, *burnout* is conceptualised as the central outcome of the health deterioration process within the JD-R model and is defined as a multidimensional syndrome characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and a reduced sense of personal efficacy (Maslach and Jackson, 1981; Maslach et al., 2001). Empirical evidence consistently shows that *burnout* not only affects individual well-being but also impairs organisational functioning by interfering with key processes such as concentration, decision-making and work performance (Corbeanu et al., 2023; Edú-Valsania et al., 2022; Lemonaki et al., 2021).

For its part, job performance is conceptualised, within the JD-R framework, as the result of the interaction between job demands and available resources (Sonnetag and Frese, 2003). From a multidimensional perspective, this study distinguishes between task performance—referring to behaviours directly linked to the execution of the job’s core functions—and contextual performance, which includes discretionary behaviours that contribute to the social and psychological functioning of the organisation (Borman and Motowidlo, 1997; Koopmans et al., 2012). Whilst performance can be assessed using objective indicators or through evaluations carried out by supervisors, this study has chosen to analyse self-reported performance.

The theoretical model therefore posits that burnout and work engagement may act as relevant explanatory mechanisms in the relationship between LBS and job performance (see Figure 1). Specifically, it is tentatively proposed that burnout could act as a deteriorating mechanism associated with lower levels of performance, whilst work engagement could act as a motivational mechanism associated with higher levels of performance. Furthermore, a possible direct effect of LBS on performance is considered, in line with previous research (Greškovičová and Lisá, 2023; Laguía et al., 2024, 2025; Lisá et al., 2021; Moriano et al., 2021).

Based on this theoretical framework, and given the pilot nature of the study, the following preliminary hypotheses are formulated:

H1. LBS will be positively related to *work engagement*.

H2. LBS will be negatively related to *burnout*.

H3. *Burnout* will be negatively related to job performance.

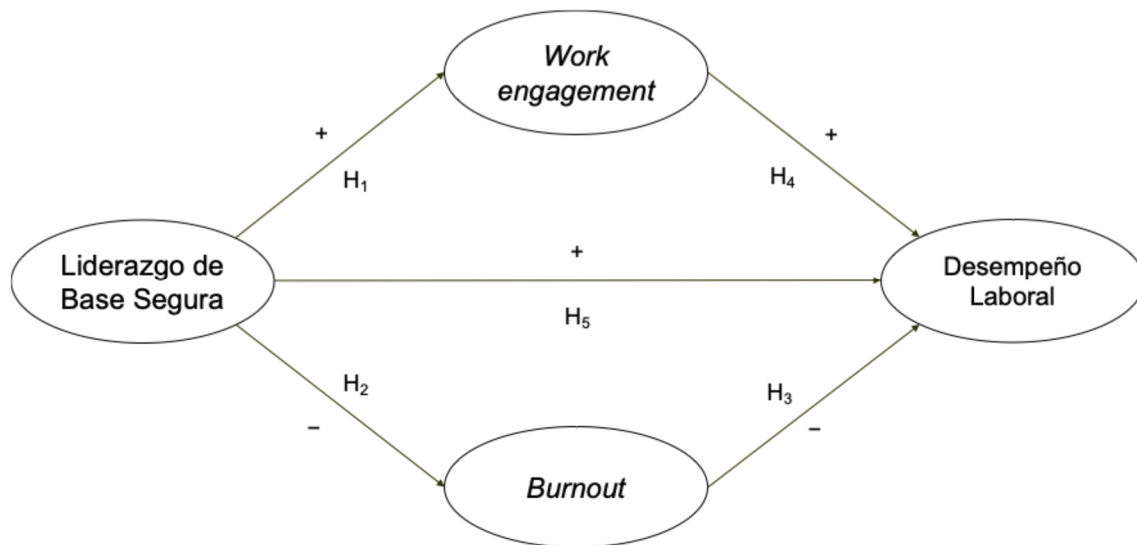
H4. *Work engagement* will be positively related to job performance.

H5. LBS will be positively related to job performance.

H6. The relationship between LBS and job performance will involve indirect effects via *work engagement* (H6a) and *burnout* (H6b).

Figure 1 shows the theoretical model proposed in this study, as well as the hypothesised relationships between the variables analysed. Specifically, the hypotheses formulated regarding the direct relationships between the constructs under consideration are represented graphically. However, Hypothesis 6, which refers to the indirect effects proposed in the model, is not included in the diagram in order to ensure the clarity and interpretability of the figure.

Figure 1
Proposed theoretical model and hypotheses.



2. METHOD

2.1. PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Data collection was carried out in territorial units of Guardia Civil belonging to the Aragón Zone, including posts under the command of the Zaragoza, Huesca and Teruel Command Centres. Prior to this, formal institutional authorisation was obtained from the Regional Headquarters to carry out the study. These units are characterised by their small size and a high degree of operational proximity between commanders and subordinates, making them a particularly suitable context for analysing relational processes associated with leadership.

The study was publicised via an official communication through the relevant organisational structure, providing potential participants with a link to access the online questionnaire administered via the Qualtrics platform. This communication was purely for information purposes and served as an invitation to participate; participation was not part of any professional assessment procedure nor did it have any employment-related or hierarchical consequences for the recipients. The first page of the questionnaire outlined the general objective of the study, its academic nature, the option to contact the principal investigator by email, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Only those who gave their express consent to participate were able to access the research scales included in this online questionnaire; those who declined to participate were simply shown a message of thanks and exited the questionnaire.

Participation was entirely voluntary, asynchronous and anonymous, with the confidentiality of responses guaranteed, as no personally identifiable data was collected from participants. No names, professional identification numbers, email addresses or any other data that would allow respondents to be directly identified were requested. Only general socio-demographic and professional data were collected, such as age, gender, educational level, length of service and frequency of contact with the immediate line

manager. The questionnaires could be completed on either work or personal devices within the specified timeframe, and all staff wishing to take part in the research were encouraged to contribute to the pilot study. No posts within the territorial jurisdiction of the Aragon region were selected or excluded.

Participants were selected using non-probabilistic convenience sampling, conditioned by access to the units and voluntary participation, in line with the dissemination procedure employed. This type of sampling is common in research conducted within institutional organisational contexts. In line with this approach, the study is exploratory in nature, aimed at identifying patterns of relationship between variables rather than establishing inferences that can be generalised to the entire organisation.

A total of 95 participants completed the online questionnaire, representing an approximate response rate of 11.2 per cent. As an inclusion criterion, participants were required to be currently employed and to have a direct line manager with whom they interacted regularly, so that they could assess that manager's leadership behaviour. Eighteen questionnaires were excluded from the analyses: two because consent to participate in the study had not been given following the presentation of the information sheet (and so these participants were not shown the study scales), and the remaining 16 because they contained no responses to the items on the scale measuring LBS. This exclusion was applied because the LBS measure constituted the main independent variable in the model; therefore, the absence of responses on that scale prevented the estimation of the relationships hypothesised in the study. The resulting final sample comprised 77 participants.

The sample consisted mainly of men (88.6%). In terms of educational attainment, 44.9% had completed upper secondary education, 24.6% had vocational training and 30.4% had a university education. The mean age of the participants was 38.08 years ($SD = 8.71$). The average length of service in the force was 11.19 years ($SD = 11.14$), indicating a sample with diverse professional experience. The average number of staff per post was 12.12 ($SD = 6.73$), reflecting the small size of the units analysed. With regard to work dynamics, participants reported frequent contact with their direct line manager, averaging 4.64 days per week ($SD = 1.71$), which indicates a high level of closeness in the relationship between managers and subordinates.

2.2. MEASURES

A questionnaire comprising various validated scales was used to collect data, designed to assess LBS, *work engagement*, *burnout* and perceived job performance.

LBS was measured using the *Leader as a Security Provider Scale* (LSPS; Molero et al., 2019), comprising 15 items that assess the perception of the line manager as a supportive figure who inspires trust and facilitates development. The instructions and items were formulated with reference to the direct line manager (e.g., 'When something goes wrong or I feel unwell at work, I turn to my line manager for support'). Responses were collected using a five-point Likert scale (0 = *strongly disagree*; 4 = *strongly agree*).

Work engagement was assessed using the ultra-short, three-item Spanish version of the *Utrecht Work Engagement Scale* (UWES-3; Schaufeli et al., 2019), which measures

vigour, dedication and absorption (e.g., ‘I am enthusiastic about my activities’). Responses were recorded on a five-point frequency scale (0 = *never*; 4 = *always*).

Burnout was measured using the emotional exhaustion subscale of the Spanish version of the *Maslach Burnout Inventory–General Survey* (MBI-GS; Salanova et al., 2000; Schaufeli et al., 1996), which assesses the extent to which individuals feel emotionally drained by their work (e.g., “I feel emotionally drained by my work”). Responses were recorded on a five-point frequency scale (0 = *never*; 4 = *always*).

Perceived work performance was assessed using the Spanish adaptation of the *Individual Work Performance Questionnaire* (IW PQ; Koopmans et al., 2012; Ramos-Villagrasa et al., 2019), which measures two dimensions: task performance and contextual performance. Participants indicated how often they engaged in certain work-related behaviours (e.g., “I have organised my work so that I can finish it on time”), using a five-point scale (0 = *rarely*; 4 = *always*).

Table 1 presents the main indicators of reliability and convergent validity for these scales. Generally speaking, the results indicate that the measures used offer adequate internal consistency; that is, the items on each scale correlate consistently with one another. Furthermore, the *Average Variance Extracted* (AVE) values were above 0.50 for all constructs, indicating that each scale adequately captures the content of the concept it is intended to measure. In the case of *work engagement*, the ultra-short UWES-3 version showed adequate indicators of reliability and convergent validity, which supports its use despite the small number of items. The high internal consistency of the LBS scale reflects a high degree of homogeneity amongst its items, consistent with the specificity of the construct being assessed, although this finding should be interpreted with caution given the pilot nature of this study.

Table 1
Reliability and convergent validity of the scales.

Variable	Cronbach’s α	Composite reliability	AVE
LBS	,97	,98	,71
<i>Work engagement</i>	,84	,90	,76
<i>Burnout</i>	,77	,71	,61
Work performance	,93	,94	,57

Note: LBS: Secure Base Leadership. AVE: average variance extracted.

As a further check, we examined whether the scales adequately distinguished between the various concepts analysed and whether there were problems of excessive overlap between the variables in the model. To this end, the HTMT (*Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio*) was calculated, which is used to assess discriminant validity between constructs, and VIF (*Variance Inflation Factor*) values were calculated to detect possible

collinearity issues (Hair et al., 2017; Henseler et al., 2015). The HTMT values were below the recommended threshold of 0.85 (range: 0.41–0.75), supporting the differentiation between the constructs. Furthermore, the VIF values for the structural model remained within acceptable ranges (1.00–2.00), with no evidence of significant multicollinearity issues.

2.3. DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling based on the Partial Least Squares technique (*Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling*, PLS-SEM), using the SmartPLS 4 software (Ringle et al., 2025). PLS-SEM was chosen as it is a variance-based technique suitable for exploratory and prediction-oriented studies, particularly when working with models that include latent variables, indirect relationships and small sample sizes. Furthermore, PLS-SEM does not require strict assumptions of multivariate normality and allows for the simultaneous estimation of the relationships proposed in the theoretical model (Hair et al., 2017; Henseler et al., 2015). The suitability of the measures was verified using the reliability and validity indicators described in the previous section.

The statistical significance of the estimated relationships was assessed using *bootstrapping* with 5,000 resamples, with a significance criterion of $t > 1.96$ ($p < 0.05$). Given the pilot nature of the study and the available sample size, the results should be interpreted with caution, focusing primarily on the direction, magnitude and theoretical plausibility of the estimated relationships. Consequently, the analyses are to be understood as a preliminary exploration of the role of LBS as an organisational resource, rather than as definitive confirmatory evidence of a causal model.

3. RESULTS

Firstly, a descriptive analysis of the study's main variables was carried out with the aim of examining the levels of LBS, *work engagement*, *burnout* and perceived job performance amongst the sample of subordinates from the territorial units in the Aragón region included in this pilot study. The results show that LBS scores are above the theoretical midpoint of the scale ($M = 2.83$; $SD = 0.69$), indicating a favourable perception of leadership style amongst subordinates. Consistent with this, *work engagement* shows high scores ($M = 3.22$; $SD = 0.75$), whilst *burnout* remains at low levels ($M = 0.89$; $SD = 0.61$). Perceived work performance also lies above the midpoint ($M = 3.06$; $SD = 0.45$), reflecting a positive perception of effectiveness at work.

Taken together, these results form a consistent pattern characterised by high levels of LBS, *work engagement* and performance, alongside low levels of *burnout*. This profile suggests favourable organisational functioning in the sample analysed and is consistent with the characteristics of the territorial units, where the relational proximity between managers and subordinates is high.

In order to examine the relationships between the variables, Pearson's correlations were calculated (Table 2). The results show that LBS is positively associated with *work engagement* ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$) and with perceived work performance ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$), and negatively associated with *burnout* ($r = -0.30$, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, *work engagement* is positively related to perceived performance ($r = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$) and

negatively related to *burnout* ($r = -0.64, p < 0.01$). For its part, *burnout* is negatively related to perceived performance ($r = -0.58, p < 0.01$).

Taken together, this pattern of relationships provides initial empirical support for the hypotheses put forward, suggesting that LBS is associated with higher levels of *work engagement* and better performance, as well as lower levels of *burnout*. Furthermore, the results show that *work engagement* is positively related to job performance, whilst *burnout* is negatively related to it, reinforcing the idea that motivational and exhaustion processes are directly linked to perceived efficacy at work in this context.

Table 2
Correlations between LBS, work engagement, burnout and perceived work performance.

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. LBS	—			
2. <i>Work engagement</i>	,44**	—		
3. <i>Burnout</i>	-0.30*	-0.64**	—	
4. Work performance	,48**	,53**	-0.58**	—

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. SBL: Secure Base Leadership.

In order to test the hypotheses of the proposed theoretical model, a structural equation analysis was carried out using the partial least squares method (PLS-SEM). The estimated model is presented in Figure 2.

The results show that SBL is positively and significantly related to *work engagement* ($\beta = 0.52, p < 0.001$) and negatively and significantly related to *burnout* ($\beta = -0.38, p < 0.001$), confirming hypotheses H1 and H2. These results indicate that the perception of the line manager as a source of support and guidance not only promotes work engagement but also helps to reduce emotional exhaustion.

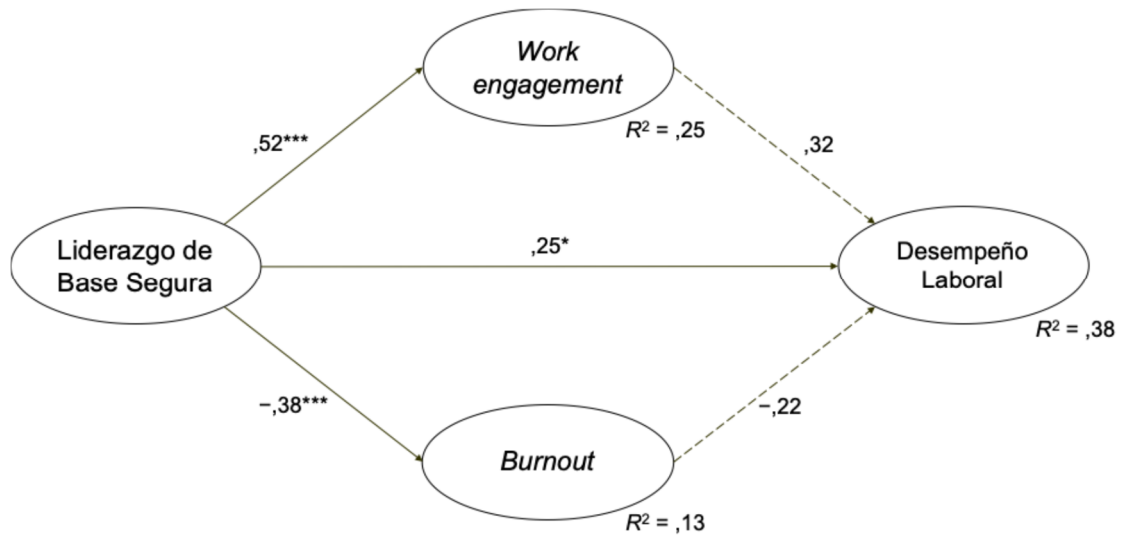
With regard to perceived work performance, LBS shows a positive and significant relationship ($\beta = 0.25, p < 0.05$), which provides empirical support for hypothesis H5. Meanwhile, although *work engagement* is positively associated with performance ($\beta = 0.32, p = 0.07$) and *burnout* shows a negative relationship with performance ($\beta = -0.22, p = 0.17$), neither of these associations reaches statistical significance; therefore, no empirical support is found for hypotheses H3 and H4. This pattern suggests that, in the sample analysed, leadership influences perceived performance primarily through a direct effect, without the psychological states under consideration—*work engagement* and *burnout*—consistently mediating that effect on performance.

Consequently, the mediation hypotheses (H6a and H6b) are not supported by the empirical evidence, suggesting that the role of *work engagement* and *burnout* as explanatory mechanisms between leadership and performance is not fully supported in this model. However, this result should be interpreted with caution. In the case of *work engagement*, the relationship with performance is close to the level of significance ($\beta = .32, p = .07$), suggesting that it might reach significance in larger samples. Meanwhile,

the low levels of *burnout* observed in the sample reduce its variability, which limits its explanatory power and may make it difficult to detect significant effects.

Finally, in terms of explained variance, the model has moderate explanatory power, accounting for 25.7% of *work engagement*, 13.2% of *burnout* and 38.6% of work performance. This result suggests that LBS is a relevant predictor of perceived performance, primarily via the motivational pathway; although the relationship between *work engagement* and performance does not reach statistical significance, its magnitude and proximity to the significance threshold point to a potentially relevant role. Conversely, the lower explanatory power of *burnout* appears to be due to its low levels in the sample, which reduces its variability and limits its contribution to the model. Taken together, these findings suggest that, in this organisational context, motivational processes carry greater weight than burnout processes in explaining job performance.

Figure 2
Structural model analysis.



Note: *p < 0.05, ***p < 0.001. R²: coefficient of determination. The dotted lines represent statistically non-significant relationships (p > 0.05).

4. DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to conduct an exploratory analysis of the role of LBS in territorial units of Guardia Civil and its relationship with key psychosocial variables, specifically *work engagement*, *burnout* and perceived job performance, integrating these relationships into the JD-R model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, 2017). In general terms, the results provide partial support for the proposed theoretical model and allow for a better understanding of how the exercise of leadership can influence the well-being and performance of members of Guardia Civil’s territorial units in the current environment.

Firstly, the descriptive results show that the participants in this study perceive behaviours in their superiors that are consistent with the LBS. This finding is particularly relevant in the context of Guardia Civil, where superiors serve as a direct point of reference in day-to-day service. In territorial units, the post commander or immediate superior not only organises the work but also continuously influences decision-making, the management of complex situations and the unit's atmosphere. In this regard, the results suggest that leadership is not limited to compliance with rules and procedures, but naturally incorporates relational elements based on trust, closeness and support. This interpretation is consistent both with the Corps' institutional tradition, centred on moral authority and setting an example (Del Moral, 2023; Martínez-Viqueira, 2024), and with the literature on LBS, which defines a leader as a figure capable of providing psychological safety in demanding contexts (Lobato et al., 2024; Navas-Jiménez et al., 2025).

With regard to the hypotheses, the results confirm that LBS is positively associated with *work engagement* (H1) and negatively associated with *burnout* (H2), which supports its role as an organisational resource within the JD-R model. This finding is particularly relevant in demanding operational contexts, as it suggests that the way in which leadership is exercised can influence how individuals cope with the demands of service. When leadership is perceived as a secure base, staff are more likely to experience greater engagement, energy and work orientation, as well as lower levels of emotional exhaustion. This result is consistent with previous research showing that LBS can reduce work-related stress and promote commitment in demanding organisational and operational contexts, including military environments (Lobato et al., 2024; Moriano et al., 2021; Navas-Jiménez et al., 2025).

On the other hand, the results relating to perceived performance require a nuanced interpretation. LBS showed a direct, positive and significant relationship with work performance (H5), reinforcing the idea that management can have a significant influence on staff's perceived effectiveness. However, the relationships between *work engagement* and *burnout* and work performance did not reach statistical significance in the structural model, although both variables were significantly related to work performance in the correlational analysis. Specifically, *work engagement* showed a positive correlation with performance ($r = 0.53, p < 0.01$) and *burnout* a negative correlation ($r = -0.58, p < 0.01$), but these relationships ceased to be significant when estimated simultaneously alongside the direct effect of LBS. This difference between the bivariate results and the structural model should not be interpreted as a contradiction, but rather as a consequence of the different approaches to statistical analysis. Correlations show simple associations between pairs of variables, whilst the PLS-SEM model estimates partial effects, whilst simultaneously controlling for the rest of the relationships included in the model. In this case, the direct effect of LBS on performance remained significant, whilst the pathways from *work engagement* and *burnout* to performance did not reach significance. This pattern suggests that, in the sample analysed, the data provide clearer support for a direct relationship between LBS and perceived performance than for mediation via the two psychological states under consideration.

The lack of empirical support for the mediation hypotheses (H6a and H6b) does not imply that *work engagement* and *burnout* are irrelevant to performance. In fact, both variables were significantly related to performance in the correlational analysis, and the path between *work engagement* and performance approached the conventional level of

significance in the structural model. Rather, the results suggest that, in this pilot study, their role as mediating mechanisms is not sufficiently supported when the relationships are estimated simultaneously. Whilst the high negative association between *work engagement* and *burnout* ($r = -0.64, p < 0.01$) suggests an overlap between these two psychological states—which could reduce the specific contribution of each variable within the model—the VIF values in the structural model remained within acceptable ranges (1.00–2.00), indicating the absence of significant multicollinearity issues.

In practical terms, these findings suggest that the LBS may constitute a relevant organisational resource for the territorial units of Guardia Civil. The perception of the commanding officer as an approachable, accessible figure capable of providing security appears to be associated not only with higher levels of commitment and lower levels of burnout, but also with better perceived job performance. In contexts where the work combines operational demands, uncertainty, proximity to the public and the need for coordination, LBS can act as a key resource for sustaining both well-being and professional effectiveness.

4.1. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Despite the interest of the findings, this study must be interpreted in light of its pilot, exploratory and cross-sectional nature. Its main aim was not to draw causal conclusions or generalisations applicable to the Guardia Civil as a whole, but rather to offer an initial empirical exploration of the role of LBS as an organisational resource in territorial units.

A first limitation relates to the size and composition of the sample. Although the study was conducted within an institutional context that is difficult to access and involved personnel posted to actual territorial units, the final sample was small ($N = 77$), which limits the statistical power of the model, particularly when it comes to detecting indirect effects or mediations (Hair et al., 2017). Furthermore, the low response rate may introduce self-selection bias, as it is possible that those who chose to participate differ from those who did not respond. Consequently, the results should be understood as preliminary evidence and not as a representative estimate of the Civil Guard's territorial units as a whole.

Secondly, the cross-sectional design prevents the establishment of causal relationships between the variables. Although the theoretical model suggests that LBS may act as an organisational resource associated with higher levels of *work engagement*, lower levels of *burnout* and better performance, the data were collected at a single point in time. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that reciprocal relationships exist or that certain organisational conditions simultaneously influence perceptions of leadership, well-being and performance. Future research should employ longitudinal designs that allow for an analysis of how these relationships evolve over time, particularly during periods of increased operational workload, changes in leadership or critical situations.

Thirdly, all variables were assessed via self-reports in a single questionnaire, which may increase the risk of common-method bias and social desirability bias. This issue is particularly relevant in hierarchical contexts, where perceived freedom to respond may be constrained, even when participation is formally voluntary. In this study, measures were taken to reduce this risk, such as anonymous, asynchronous and voluntary participation, the absence of direct identifying data, and the use of validated scales.

However, these safeguards do not completely eliminate the possibility of response bias. Future studies should combine self-reports with objective or semi-structured indicators, such as performance appraisals by line management, indicators of target achievement, aggregated activity data, absenteeism, staff turnover, disciplinary incidents or service quality indicators, whilst always respecting the necessary ethical and confidentiality safeguards (Koopmans et al., 2014).

Finally, the study was conducted in territorial units within a specific area; therefore, future research should be extended to other zones, headquarters and types of unit. It would also be particularly valuable to develop multi-level studies that allow for a distinction to be made between individual perceptions and shared effects at the post or unit level. This approach would make it possible to analyse whether the LBS functions solely as an individual perception of leadership or also as a shared relational climate, capable of influencing well-being, cohesion and collective performance. Furthermore, future research could incorporate variables such as resilience, organisational identification or psychological safety climate, which have been shown to be relevant in military contexts (Navas-Jiménez et al., 2024).

Taken together, these limitations do not invalidate the results, but they do limit their scope. The study provides initial empirical evidence on the usefulness of LBS in territorial units of Guardia Civil and opens up a line of applied research that should be consolidated through larger samples, longitudinal designs, multiple sources of information and more objective indicators of performance and well-being.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this preliminary study suggest that, in the sample analysed, LBS is associated with higher levels of *work engagement*, lower levels of *burnout* and better perceived work performance. These findings support the usefulness of LBS as an organisational resource in territorial units of Guardia Civil, although they should be interpreted with caution due to the pilot, cross-sectional and correlational nature of the study.

With regard to perceived performance, the LBS showed a significant direct association. However, it was not empirically confirmed that this relationship was mediated by *work engagement* or *burnout*. Therefore, the JD-R model is useful as an interpretative framework for understanding the relationship between leadership, well-being and performance, but in this study it does not allow us to conclude that the relationship between LBS and performance is explained primarily through motivational mechanisms or by a reduction in health deterioration.

Furthermore, these results should be interpreted as a first step towards the applicability of LBS within the Guardia Civil. Rather than a management-centred style, LBS focuses on the quality of the bond between superiors and subordinates, understood in terms of secure attachment, where care and challenge are combined. This involves exercising leadership by building trust, ensuring consistency in action and providing support, whilst also promoting autonomy and responsibility in the fulfilment of the mission. Furthermore, this relational dynamic is not limited to the internal functioning of

units, but can be reflected in the way service is delivered, fostering a more attentive, responsible approach that is aligned with the institutional values of Guardia Civil.

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