



The role of the police in violence prevention¹

The role of the police in controlling and preventing violence and crime is the subject of much debate—often highly charged and supported by partial data at best. Broadly, the debate breaks down into two opposing views that represent the two ends of a continuum of crime prevention programs: One view asserts the importance of the police role in controlling crime through effective law enforcement that removes criminals from the streets and increases the potential cost of committing crime, thus deterring potential offenders. The other viewpoint posits that police actions operate at the margins rather than at the root causes of crime and so have little impact on broad trends in crime rates, which are fundamentally driven by economic, demographic, social, and cultural factors.

Models of policing

The police force is a key institution in efforts to provide rapid and visible responses to public insecurity and fear of crime. In recognition of research findings that consistently indicate that traditional police law enforcement has a limited impact on crime rates, new police strategies seek to enhance the crime prevention capabilities of the police (see box). Typically, these are police operations that target proximate causes of crime (criminogenic factors) or that spur increased community engagement and police-community cooperation in crime prevention. The best-known approaches are:

- ▶ **Community policing and problem-oriented policing**
- ▶ **«Broken windows» or quality of life policing and zero-tolerance policing**

Community policing and problem-oriented policing

There are many different models and practices of community policing. Its basic tenet is to make policing more responsive and accountable to local communities (see tables). Programs seek to improve community-police dialogue and provide channels for community input to guide police responses toward crime and insecurity at the local level.

Community policing is foremost a crime prevention effort. Side by side with community policing, detectives and other special squads continue with their normal functions of traditional after-the-fact crime control. Successful community policing can enhance these other police functions if it builds greater trust between the police and the population and increases cooperation with police in criminal investigations and other operations.

Community policing requires decentralization of command and control to the local level and significant levels of discretionary action by police on the beat. Management and administrative practices must create an incentive structure that reflects a serious institutional commitment to community policing. If police perceive assignments to foot patrols in poor neighborhoods as punishment, they are unlikely to make a serious effort to engage with the local community, but will instead lobby for a rapid transfer (Neild, 1998a; da Silva and Gall, 1999).

¹ This note was prepared by Rachel Neild. Washington Office for Latin America (WOLA).

Table 1

What works in policing strategies

- **Target hardening.** Some programs try to “design out crime” by improving the security of housing, vehicles, and other property, often through door-to-door visits advising residents about ways to improve security. Police and security experts have even worked with urban planners and designers to incorporate safety issues into municipal and private developments. Some programs claim reductions of burglary rates as high as 70 percent (*Crime Prevention Digest, 1997*).
- **Directed patrols.** Studies consistently find that more targeted patrols focused on crime hot-spots reduce crime in high-risk areas. One study found that the longer the police stayed in an area, the longer the period that area stayed free of crime after police left. This finding held true for a police presence of one to fifteen minutes, after which the relationship began to reverse (Koper cited in Sherman, 1998). Increased patrols to crime hot spots also appears to slow increases in calls for service, which were three times greater in hot spots without extra patrols (Sherman and Weisberd, cited in Sherman 1998)
- **Crackdowns.** These short, focused police operations combine proactive arrests with targeted patrols and high police presence in hot-spots. They often reduce crime sharply in the short term and may have residual effects for up to two years (Sherman, 1987, as cited in Bayley, 1997, 80-81). However, it is hard to maintain a large police presence and its consequent deterrent effect over the long term.

And what doesn't

- **Quicker response.** In the 1970s U.S. police departments allocated greater resources to expediting police responses to emergency calls in the belief that the quicker the police could arrive at a crime scene, the more likely they would find and arrest the suspect. However, a major study found that the average time between commission of crime and citizen reports is 41 minutes (Marvell and Moody 1996). Thus more rapid arrival of police has little impact on arrest rates.
- **Random patrols.** The most famous patrol experiment found that adding a patrol presence that is not directly focused on high-crime areas has no crime prevention effect (Kelling, Wasserman, and Williams, 1998). Analysts have critiqued the study's methodology while also noting that another study that found some crime-prevention effect from increasing random foot patrols was even less rigorous. Overall, many analysts believe that the costs of increasing the number of police to the point where it would have a significant impact on crime are prohibitive (Bayley, 1994; Morgan and Newburn, 1997).
- **Reactive arrests.** Reactive arrests are based on the premise that the more arrests police make for any sort of crime, the less crime there will be. Studies find, however, that reactive arrests have little deterrent effect. There is some indication that arrest may increase the chances that juveniles will commit more crimes. In domestic violence cases there is strong evidence that arrests reduce recidivism among employed individuals and, it increase it among the unemployed.
- **Proactive arrests.** Proactive arrests are focus on specific high-risk groups, such as drunk drivers or repeat offenders. Studies find such tactics to be effective in reducing drunk driving, but there is less evidence that they reduce drug crimes. Studies also indicate that the impact of proactive arrest tactics is fleeting. Studies of massive arrests for minor offences also raise concerns about the potential criminogenic effect of the arrests themselves, by reducing police legitimacy and making detainees more defiant and prone to violence.

Table 2

Common elements of community policing:

- Community-police forums to identify problems and set crime fighting priorities
- Police-sponsored neighborhood or block watches and business watch programs
- Community identification of local problems (through surveys, town meetings, etc.)
- Crime prevention newsletters and other crime education programs for the public
- Small police stations
- Promotion of civilian volunteer liaison with community
- Police foot patrols
- Special problem solving task units
- Increased attention to minor offenses that are major annoyances to local residents
- Permanent assignment of officers to neighborhoods
- More minority hiring
- Increased education level of police
- Reassignment of certain management tasks from police personnel to civilian personnel
- Addition of “master police officer” positions to increase rewards for line officers.

► **Impact on crime**

Many community policing tactics—such as neighborhood watches, police newsletters, and storefront police stations—have little or no impact on crime (see table 3). Door to door visits by police help reduce crime in wealthier neighborhoods but have little impact on poor communities. Police-community meetings appear most promising when focused on specific crime problems (Sherman 1998).

However, across a wide variety of national settings, community policing—including tactics that do not appear to affect actual crime rates—often increases police legitimacy and reduces residents’ fear of crime (Bayley, 1994; Sherman, 1998; Chinchilla and Rico, 1997; ISER, 1996; Morgan and Newburn, 1997.)

Initial examinations suggest that more sophisticated approaches building on the community policing philosophy may be more effective in crime prevention. *Problem-oriented policing* asserts that police tactics should focus on research and identification of the causes of crime, with specific responses designed to reduce or eliminate those causes (Goldstein, 1990, 1998). These responses frequently involve removing criminogenic factors (guns, drugs, alcohol, prostitu-

tion) and increasing controls (cash control, street barriers, and youth curfews) and separating potential victims and offenders. The evidence suggests that control of guns, alcohol and prostitution can have important effects in reducing violent crime (Sherman, 1998).

Police and researchers have also found that community policing is an effective mean of bringing about better relations between police and communities (see table 4). In the United States, police appear to adopt community policing with this explicit expectation:

Police organizations seem to be uncertain about the effectiveness and consequences of the new [community policing] programs, but willing to give them a try. However, the effectiveness of innovations is judged more by outside recognition of their value than by technical rationality based in the cost/benefit analysis of technical core activities. (Zhao and Thurman, 1996, 15)

Such findings are duplicated in some of the limited experiences with community policing in Latin America (Costa Rica and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; see table 4). Many Latin America analysts see community

Table 3

The U.K. model of community policing

In the United Kingdom, the 1982 Police and Criminal Evidence Bill (PACE) required local police chiefs to obtain the views of local people about policing in their area and to seek cooperation in crime-prevention. Local police authorities established Police-Community Consultative Groups in response. Studies indicate that they have had little impact on police priorities and produced few practical crime prevention initiatives. Nonetheless, they have helped improve public confidence in the police (Morgan and Newburn, 1997).

policing as a means of reducing and controlling police abuse in Latin America (Fruhling, 1997; de Mesquita, 1998).

► **Challenges**

Community policing presents several challenges:

- A frequent cause of the failure of community policing is resistance by police leadership. Many community-policing programs are criticized as top-down exercises in public relations. Police frequently resist serious community input into police practices. Police must be prepared to respond to the concerns of the community in a serious manner and to listen to criticism. Criticisms may well include sensitive issues such as police abuse, corruption, and discrimination against targeted social sectors. “Any attempt to establish ‘community policing’ which is not accompanied by a genuine community accountability and control of policing policy and practice is almost always doomed to failure” (Stenning, 1984).
- Social scientists, who have studied community policing efforts in Latin America also note that certain tactics, such as increasing foot patrols, may be prohibitively costly for cash-strapped governments. They also observe that most Latin American police, who often have low education levels and are accustomed to hierarchical, command-driven policing, require specialized training and education to support taking more initiative and

Table 4

Less fear, better public image of police in Costa Rica

A community policing program in the Hatillo neighborhood in Costa Rica set up four police substations, regular car and foot patrols, and advisory committees to the precinct commander, with representatives from the community, churches, sports leagues, schools, and health services. The initiative reduced victimization by 9.5 percent according to a 1997 survey, and brought about impressive reductions in the level of fear (general concern about insecurity dropped 16.8 percent and fear of being robbed at home 32 percent). The initiative also improved the image of the police force (Chinchilla y Rico 1997; see detailed survey results in Technical Note 6).

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

In 1994, 60 police officers (recent high school graduates) were trained in community policing and distributed within the neighborhoods of Copacabana and Lema. Each officer had significant discretion to organize work routines and develop relationships with local residents, merchants, street vendors, and so on. Each region also had a community council that met with the police to review safety problems and suggest solutions. Suggestion boxes were distributed throughout the area. Police were encouraged to identify problems and solutions oriented to crime prevention (ISER 1996). In one case, police helped to organize street children to wash cars for money rather than beg.

An evaluation found modest but measurable results in a decrease in disorderly conduct in the streets, arrests of drug traffickers, and the dismantling of a crime ring that forged identification cards for child prostitutes. The initiative was also found to have increased confidence in the police and reduced public fear of crime (ISER 1996).

operating with the greater autonomy and use of discretion required by community policing approaches (Fruhling, 1997; de Mesquita, 1998)

- Community policing also assumes that the public wants a partnership with police. In Latin America, efforts to engage with local communities' face the challenge of overcoming deep mistrust of police, particularly in poor communities that have experienced the brunt of police abuse (Fruhling, 1997; de Mesquita, 1998). The police may need to demonstrate that they are worthy partners. One tactic to win community support adopted in Baltimore, in the United States, was to increase local hard-core crime fighting by police, focusing attention on a small, targeted area, such as a neighborhood gang problem, and then to bring in other services.
- Human rights advocates have raised concerns that if community-policing programs are initiated without any change in the way that public order and security problems are defined; they may well be exploited as tools of intelligence gathering and social control. Tactics similar to community policing, such as neighborhood watch programs and civilian patrols, have been used by authoritarian regimes and in counterinsurgency campaigns (Neild 1998a).
- Communities, particularly poor and marginalized communities, may require assistance and capacity building to help them participate effectively in police-community interactions. In Argentina and South Africa, 2 newly created community-police forums required capacity building and training for members in order to function more effectively (Bruce, 1997; Mistry, 1996).
- Other common challenges include the need to:
 - ▶ Overcome community skepticism and the sense of having heard it all before.
 - ▶ Alter initial public perceptions that the approach is soft on crime.
 - ▶ Provide the resources and structures required for the community to put these theories into practice, especially the social services required by problem-oriented policing approaches.
 - ▶ Overcome people's fear that they will face reprisals from criminals if they cooperate with the police.

Broken-windows and zero-tolerance policing

A famous essay by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling entitled "Broken Windows," put forward the theory that general disorder, such as buildings with broken windows, piles of trash in the streets, and lack of street lighting, create an environment of social disorder that invites crime. Even relatively small problems, such as abandoned cars or buildings, graffiti, and panhandlers, create an environment that encourages more serious crime. Under a *broken-windows approach*, police use loitering and vagrancy laws more aggressively to move beggars and drug dealers off corners. Police also notify authorities in charge of housing or public works and get them to remove trash and improve lighting, thus making the neighborhood appear safer and reducing fear. In *zero-tolerance policing*, a variant of broken-windows policing, police make arrests for all or most minor violations rather than using their discretion about whether to arrest or simply issue a warning or ignore an infraction.

▶ Impact on crime

Zero-tolerance policing has been most famously applied in New York City under Police Commissioner William Bratton. Proponents argue that massive arrests for minor offences increase the deterrent impact of policing and may also reduce crime if, in detaining so many people on minor charges, police catch individuals wanted for more serious offences.

There are serious risks of discrimination and violation of rights associated with zero-tolerance policing, but it can be effective if focused on particular crime issues or high crime neighborhoods. But there is little indication that such approaches are more successful in reducing crime than other police tactics that have not generated as many civilian complaints (Greene, 1998).

Challenges. Broken-windows and zero-tolerance policing have been criticized in the United States as contributing to an increase in citizen complaints about police behavior. As applied in poor, inner-city environments, minority black and Latino communities find these methods to be heavy-handed. In New York City, the number of citizen complaints against the police increased more than 60 percent between 1992 and 1996 (Greene, 1998).

Table 6

Lack of confidence in the police

In Argentina a 1996 Gallup poll in Buenos Aires found that lack of confidence in the criminal justice system had grown from 42 percent in 1984 to 89 percent (cited in Tiscornia, 1998). Another 1996 poll found 85 percent of the population felt unprotected—44 percent because of a lack of confidence in the police (Romer & Associates March 1996, cited in Tiscornia, 1998). Police have extensive arrest powers to establish an individual's identity (“*detención por averiguación de antecedentes*”), which is claimed to help control and prevent crime. A recent study found no correlation between the variance in the crime rate and the numbers of such detentions but did find some correlation between media focus on crime waves and police detentions (Tiscornia, Eilbaum, and Lekerman 1999). The study likewise found no impact on secondary clearances (when someone detained for one reason is found to have a warrant pending for another offence or confesses to another crime), finding that only 0.2 percent of identification detainees had warrants pending against them. This phenomenon goes far beyond Argentina. As a region, Latin America is experiencing a crisis of credibility of public security institutions (see Technical Note 6 for further data on lack of confidence in police).

Police arrests for minor violations have met similar criticisms in Latin America. In Chile 35 percent of arrests are for public drunkenness and another 19 percent for “suspicion” (*por sospechas*). These tactics have been criticized as discriminating against youth and having little impact on crime, leading to congressional discussion of imposing greater limits on police detention powers (Fruhling, 1997). Extensive use of identification checks by police in Argentina, which appear to increase following media attention to public security issues, bear no relation to trends in crime rates (Tiscornia, Eilbaum, and Lekerman, 1999; see table). Overall, evidence indicates that such tactics should be used with great caution:

Rude or hostile treatment of citizens, especially juveniles, can provoke angry reactions that increase the risk of future offending. Flooding high crime communities with aggressive police could backfire terribly, causing more crime than it prevents, as has happened in repeated race riots over the past quarter century. (Sherman 1998).

Police reform: effectiveness, responsiveness, and accountability

Widespread fear of crime often leads to public demands for more police on the streets and for “tough on crime” (*mano dura*) responses. Yet research

indicates that such policies have limited effect and are very expensive. It is not clear that expanding police powers will make police more effective. In many countries, police already have extensive powers and operate with relatively little oversight from political and judicial authorities, communities, or civil society. There is a serious danger that an expansion in police powers will increase levels of violence, undermine democratic guarantees, and further erode confidence in the criminal justice system.

One of the most striking recent findings is the extent to which the police themselves create a risk factor for crime simply by using bad manners. Modest but consistent scientific evidence supports the thesis that the less respectful police are towards suspects and citizens generally; the fewer people will comply with the law. Changing police “style” may thus be as important as focusing police “substance”. Making both the style and substance of police practices more “legitimate” in the eyes of the public, particularly high-risk juveniles, may be one of the most effective long-term police strategies for crime prevention. (Sherman, 1998).

In the context of the current crisis of policing in Latin America, the most promising strategy to improve police effectiveness may be to improve police-community relations and boost police credibility (see table 6). Reforms that seek to reduce police corruption, strengthen police accountability,

and improve community relations are likely to lead to increased crime reporting and more public cooperation with police. This will provide valuable support for traditional crime control activities—identifying suspects and witnesses, conducting investigations, and making cases based on witnesses and material evidence rather than confessions.

A recent definition proposes that democratic policing be based on the principles of responsiveness and

Table 7

Police need public cooperation to find out about crimes...

- ▶ Working alone, police discover only 5–10 percent of all recorded crimes (Morgan and Newburn, 1997, 117)
- ▶ Studies show that the key to solving crime is whether the public—victims and witnesses—provide the police with information that helps to identify the suspect (Morgan and Newburn, 1997; Greenwood, Petersilia, and Chaiken, 1977, cited in Bayley, 1994; Eck 1982).
- ▶ Detective work and technological methods such as fingerprinting, forensic tests, and DNA sampling may be involved in as few as 5 percent of cases (Morgan and Newburn, 1997, 118).

...Yet public cooperation with police in Latin America is abysmally low

- ▶ In Chile only about one-third of robberies are reported to police (Fruhling, 1997).
- ▶ A 1996 survey in El Salvador found that only 25 percent of crimes are reported to the police (Chinchilla and Rico, 1997).
- ▶ In Rio de Janeiro a 1996 survey found that only 12 percent of robbery victims reported the crime to police (Human Rights Watch, 1997).
- ▶ A 1998 poll commissioned by the Peruvian congress found that 91 percent of robberies are not reported; 28 percent of respondents gave lack of confidence in the police as the reason (Piqueras, 1998).



accountability. Police should be organized to be “responsive downwards” to all citizens calls for assistance rather than upwards through the chain of command or to the government, and they should be “accountable to multiple audiences through multiple mechanisms” (Bayley, 1997; Stone and Ward, 2000). This definition reflects the belief of police reformers that accountability and responsiveness, in addition to being core values of democratic policing, are key elements of more effective policing. This definition gives great importance to community relations and implies a need for participatory reform processes and accountability mechanisms:

- Action by civilian courts in cases of police corruption and abuse is essential. Continuing impunity for human rights abuse or corruption will undermine any other police reform effort and will prevent serious and durable improvements of police-community relations. Military courts continue to rule on crimes by police in many countries, and impunity for serious crimes remains widespread.

- Judicial oversight of police investigations on what constitutes admissible evidence is an important accountability mechanism in developed democracies. Many Latin American judicial authorities show little interest in overseeing police investigations more thoroughly or in checking abuses.
- Police administrative and disciplinary mechanisms should incorporate international human rights and law enforcement standards and be applied consistently and fairly. In many countries, disciplinary manuals focus on institutional disciplinary issues rather than relations with the public and punishments are applied arbitrarily and often brutally (Neild, 1998b; Chevigny, 1995).
- External citizen review of police should be instituted to demonstrate commitment to accountable policing and facilitate citizen complaints of police misconduct. An alternative is to strengthen the police oversight powers of human rights ombudsman's offices (Neild 2000; Walker and Wright, 1995).
- Parliaments have legislative powers to establish police and security policies, to oversee budgets, to approve senior appointments, and often to investigate specific accusations of corruption or abuse. Parliamentary oversight seeks to protect security operations from political influence, not substitute the political influence of the parliament for that of the executive (Dempsey, 1998).
- Community policing resonates with principles of democratic governance by which "anyone who exercises authority on behalf of the community is accountable to the community for the exercise of that authority" (Stenning, 1984: 84). It may provide an additional means to improve police conduct. Community policing is also a logical response to research indicating that most crime patterns are highly localized and that police require community cooperation to fight crime effectively.





Can we import foreign models of policing?

The very different environments of developed democracies and most Latin American nations raise issues about the transferability of police tactics. Police tactics represent the structures and the values of the communities or nations that the police work for (Chevigny, 1995). In much of Latin America great wealth and extreme poverty coexist. The police are experienced as a “service”—even if an increasingly inadequate one—by the wealthy, but as a repressive “force” by the poor. Public security spending is far more evenly provided to both poor and wealthier communities in developed democracies. Exporting specific crime control and prevention strategies from a context with unemployment rates of 5 percent to nations where a third or more of the population is living in poverty is unlikely to be effective unless tailored to local circumstances.

The differences between the U.S. common law–accusatorial legal system and Latin America’s civil law–inquisitorial system need to be analyzed for their impact on police behavior and the possibility of adapting different strategies. The accusatorial system

both allows for greater discretion by police and prosecutors through the use of tools such as plea bargains, arbitration, and mediation. It also provides for greater judicial oversight of police investigations than exist under traditional civil law systems (Palmieri, 1998).

Even setting aside these differences, the criminal justice system in many Latin American countries is performing poorly at basic tasks. Improving crime clearance and conviction rates could significantly strengthen the deterrent effect of the criminal justice system. Consider, for example, the differences in convictions rates for homicide, a crime for which the statistics are reasonably reliable. In Chile conviction rates for murder cases entering the system are 35 (in 1991) to 49 (in 1990) percent (Fruhling, 1998). The percentage drops sharply to nearly 30 percent in Honduras in 1997 and to 7 percent in El Salvador in 1996 (Palmieri, 1998).

The choice of new police tactics must match the circumstances. In communities where police have a history of partisan or clientilistic relations with local authorities and residents, the common community policing policy of assigning police to a regular beat and encouraging them to develop close relations with

residents may not be appropriate, at least initially it may be preferable to start with anticorruption measures, such as rotating patrol responsibilities, to prevent local powers from co-opting or manipulating police work and to avoid developing a regular beat for police that facilitates their ability to shake down local businesses and individuals.

The weakness of police control mechanisms and legal recourse for abuse and corruption in Latin America is a central concern in decisions about which police strategies may be usefully transferred. One possibility is the creation of a civilian review body as an integral element of community policing, as some civil rights activists in the United States have done. Another is to increase the quality and availability of information about public security issues to promote more informed discussions by the media and by policymakers with oversight powers.

For more information:

International center for the prevention of crime.
www.crime-prevention-intl.org

"Policing for Crime Prevention." In *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising*. www.ncjrs.org/works/index.htm

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