
PERSPECTIVES

SOCIAL SCIENCE

# Community policing in the developing world

## Community policing did not improve trust or reduce crime

By **Santiago Tobón**

One of the most celebrated policy reforms to fight crime and improve police legitimacy is community policing (*1*), which emphasizes intensified police relationships with the community and broad neighborhood-level interventions to enhance social order and control. Evidence from developed countries suggests that community policing improves police legitimacy and trust and sometimes reduces crime (*2*). But systematic evidence from developing countries is virtually nonexistent. On page 1098 of this issue, Blair *et al.* (*3*) report the results of a coordinated field experiment on community policing in six developing countries: Brazil, Colombia, Liberia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Uganda. Contrary to prior evidence, the study finds that community policing did not improve trust between citizens and the police, nor did it reduce crime.

The range of alternatives and innovations related to deploying police forces is broad, and unintended consequences such as no effects on crime and increases in police abuse are common (*4, 5*). Over the past few decades, economists, political scientists,

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Police officers patrol the community of Complexo do Caju, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in February 2014.

sociologists, and criminologists have turned their attention to collaborating with police agencies on developing and testing policing strategies to reduce crime and improve police legitimacy (*6*). These innovations follow four broad strategies.

Some have pursued individual-focused approaches that rely on arrests to correct criminal behavior. Others have opted for place-based practices, such as hot spots policing and targeted crackdowns that intensify police time and attention within small, geographically defined urban areas. The use of technologies such as body-worn cameras has become another common tactic. In addition, community-based approaches such as community policing have stressed the coproduction of security between communities and police forces.

Scholars have systematically studied these practices across multiple contexts. But as evidence has turned geographically broader, reasons for caution have increased. For example, early evidence overwhelmingly suggested that hot spots policing tactics reduced crime at hot spots and that crimes were rarely displaced (*7*). Yet, new evidence suggests that these results might not hold in low- and middle-income countries (*8*).

Developing countries face several problems that their wealthier counterparts seldom share. For example, governments in weaker contexts lack implementation capability across many policy domains (*9*). Policing is intrinsically more difficult to implement than other policy processes; hence, one might expect wide gaps between wealthier and poorer administrative capacities.

Also, states in fragile contexts lack a monopoly on violence, coercion, and the use of force across large swaths of their territory. Insurgencies and criminal groups challenge states to provide protection services, adjudicate disputes, and even tax communities. These groups' motives to govern and provide security are not limited to direct taxation but also aim to create and sustain residents' trust and legitimacy to protect illicit rents—especially from sources such as the drug trade (*10*). This phenomenon is widespread in Latin America and parts of Africa and Asia, where tens if not hundreds of millions of people live under criminal rule (*11*).

Limited institutional capacity in the developing world might bias the lessons learned from studies about policing. We only learn about policing interventions if police forces are sophisticated enough to implement a randomized controlled trial or if they otherwise have enough data and organizational know-how to allow for reliable nonexperimental impact evaluations.

As Blair *et al*. report, experimental and nonexperimental evidence on community policing interventions is almost exclusively from three wealthy nations: the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Blair *et al*. focus entirely on developing countries in the Global South—spanning a wide range of development outcomes—to experimentally study community policing, closing a first-order gap in science and policy. Setting up the experiments required coordinated efforts that make this work distinctive, not only for community policing but also for policing practices more generally. The task required simultaneous collaborations with police departments in all six countries to design and implement the experiments. Given differences across police departments, this is no small feat. For instance, some of these departments were policing urban areas, whereas others were in charge of rural territories. Also, the authors needed to develop similar yet locally appropriate community policing interventions across a set of diverse places. Community policing is a broad philosophy, but interventions in all sites had to share the core elements to allow for comparability. These include police–community forums, increased police presence, mechanisms for citizen feedback, and problem-oriented policing. It was also incumbent on the authors to accurately measure harmonized outcomes on crime and police legitimacy across locations. The authors focus on a wide range of outcomes, including information on citizen cooperation with and trust in the police collected through surveys, crime victimization and police abuse data, police perceptions of citizens, and administrative data on crime reports. Also, the experiments were adapted to the locally relevant experimental unit, ranging from police beats to neighborhoods, broader communities, and police stations.

Broadly, the six coordinated experiments produced results that contradict most prior knowledge on community policing. Aggregating all six studies, the interventions did not improve citizens' trust in the police, nor police trust in citizens. Community policing also failed to reduce citizens' perceptions of insecurity, victimization, and police abuse. Police capability to implement the interventions varied across places, yet even in locations where implementation followed the original intervention plan closely, there is no strong evidence of success on the primary outcomes related to crime and police legitimacy.

This study illustrates the vast diversity of policing styles and practices across contexts and the huge range of security issues that developing countries face. Many police departments in weaker contexts do not have the leadership, organization, or institutional heft to implement complex strategies. For instance, police departments in Liberia, Pakistan, and Uganda lacked even standard police equipment such as computers or vehicles. In some of these settings, violence and crime problems are deeper and more complicated. For example, nonstate coercive actors were predominant in Liberia—and also in Colombia. Hence, policy-makers and scholars should recognize that the solution has to fit the problem. This implies important limitations for transferring policies designed and implemented in wealthy nations that benefit from more resources and fewer organizational hurdles. Perhaps developing countries need to produce tailor-made strategies to counter crime and build legitimacy in ways that are more aligned with their constraints.

The study by Blair *et al*. suggests that the determinants of police trust and legitimacy remain unclear, at least in the developing world. Improving police–community relationships seems insufficient. It may be, for instance, that people form ideas about the police from the news or social media rather than through direct contact with police. Regardless of the unexpected results, this research is a proof-of-concept exercise that coordinated experiments to fight crime and violence in developing countries are possible. This possibility opens a path for testing new ideas for state- and peace-building in the world's most violent contexts. ■

Department of Economics, Universidad EAFIT, Medellín, Antioquia, Colombia. Email: stobonz@eafit.edu.co

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