

Police Reform in Latin America: Observations and Recommendations

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Throughout Latin America, crime has become a top concern to citizens, politicians, international donors, the media, and police. As democracy consolidates throughout most of the hemisphere, public safety has replaced concerns about national security, political violence, and economic stability in many countries. Crime and violence have grown steadily: between 1984 and 1994, the homicide rate in the region increased 40.9%,¹ and fear of crime seems to be outpacing its actual increase. Citizens concerned about crime often want a powerful state—and strengthened law enforcement agencies—to combat the problem with a heavy hand. In many developing democracies, of Latin America and other regions, citizens are often willing to cede more power to police today than these forces even wielded during periods of authoritarianism.²

In theory and practice, only the police have the explicit mandate of providing the broadly-defined concept of public safety. They are the sole force that are on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week, making them the agents of first response for any problem of disorder, however minor or severe. Since the late 1990s, there have been a swell of projects and programs to reform police forces, representing a second wave of initiatives in countries' transitions to democracy. State officials and civil society institutions—as well as police leaders—want a security force that is in consonance with the rest of society. The proposals for how to do this have been diverse: some aim to turn police into crusaders for human rights; others want to flatten the hierarchical chain of command; some try to scrap the existing police institution and start over; and lastly there are others that attempt to

make police more effective through the use of new tools and technology.

Although there is a growing body of police research and evaluation on Latin America, it is still small and relatively unknown. Of the analysis completed, time has been noted to be one of the distinguishing features of the reforms; most processes of police reform are recent and unfinished.

Nevertheless, it is possible to compare what we do know about some of the police reform efforts currently underway. Below are brief profiles of recent or ongoing processes of reform within police organizations in three countries: Brazil, Argentina, and Chile. In all three cases, relatively new democratic governments have been trying to cope with the same police organizations that formerly served military regimes.

CRIME AND PUBLIC SECURITY IN ARGENTINA: BUENOS AIRES PROVINCE

In December 1997, then-governor of Buenos Aires Province, Eduardo Duhalde, took drastic measures to reinvent the province's public security system. Crime was on the rise, public fear of crime was outpacing the actual increase, and illegal activity permeated the police ranks. In a span of 90 days, Duhalde dismissed more than 200 of the highest ranking officers of the Bonaerense (as the province's police force is known), divided it into 18 administrative police departments, created four



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separate police forces to perform different tasks, and named the province's first Minister of Justice and Security, a civilian, to whom the police would report. Duhalde declared the police, as well as the rest of the criminal justice system, out of date and incapable of responding to the demands of modern life.³

While Duhalde's measures tackled the problems of police corruption and abuse, they did not deal head-on with the problem of crime. Just a few months after setting the reforms in motion, the administration's efforts were discredited when indicators revealed there had been no reduction in crime. Duhalde decided to replace his Minister of Justice and Security and began emphasizing crime reduction over cleaning up the police force.

Two years after launching his "intervention," Duhalde failed to win the presidential nomination and ceded his office to Carlos Ruckauf, who ran on an anti-crime, "zero tolerance" platform. Upon taking office, Ruckauf named Aldo Rico, a former military general with a well established record for human rights abuses, as Minister of Justice and Security. More recently, Ruckauf separated the Ministry of Justice from the Ministry of Security and appointed a retired police official to lead the Ministry of Security—a move that weakened civilian control of the police.

Today, the problems of crime and insecurity persist in Buenos Aires, and the ability of the provincial police to address those problems has been increasingly important to Governor Ruckauf.

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It is still not clear whether the Governor will commit his administration to implementing a new ethos for respectful and effective police work.

POLICE REFORM IN BRAZIL: ADVANCES IN THE STATE OF MINAS GERAIS

In 1985, the Military Police of Minas Gerais—recognizing that a new era of democracy would require changes in the orientation and strategies of the police—formed a partnership with the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) to provide higher education for the police. Over time, that partnership has endured and been strengthened. The University's Center for Studies of Crime and Public Security (CRISP, in Portuguese) has recently worked with the Military Police in the city of Belo Horizonte to implement "Policing with Results," a project aimed at boosting professional skills and giving area commanders responsibility for crime reduction.

The UFMG and João Pinheiro Foundation, in genuine partnership with the police, have played a critical role in police reform in Minas Gerais. Using the expertise of sociologists and specialists in public administration from both institutions, the Military Police have tried to build a more professional, technical, and soundly administered service for citizens.⁴ Where "Policing with Results" has been most successful is in identifying specific patterns or trends in crime and taking action to disrupt them. For example, with the new crime analysis techniques that CRISP helped introduce, the Belo Horizonte Military Police were able to detect a troubling pattern of taxi robberies. The police then adopted a series of measures to prevent them—such as safety inspections for taxis on well-traveled routes—and quantitatively measured the change. Taxi robberies plummeted. Claudio Beato notes that overall crime figures for the city have not changed much since "Policing with Results" was introduced, although the rate of increase has slowed.⁵

The long-standing relationships between the Military Police and these two academic institutions have produced slow changes rather than the overnight turnaround that many police reformers seek. However, with time, the police have institutionalized the reforms, making them more difficult to reverse. As Beato signals, the Minas Gerais Military Police are still at the beginning of a long process and there is much left to do. So far, the most

important thing he and his colleagues have learned is that an effective way of introducing change in a police organization is through cooperation with universities.⁶ What exists now, he says, is a better functioning apparatus for adopting strategic or operational reforms in the future.

THE CASE OF CHILE: “PLAN CUADRANTE”

Although Chile enjoys a low per capita crime rate relative to other countries in Latin America, increasing crime and fears of attacks have put pressure on the 36,500-member national uniformed police force, the Carabineros, to look for new strategies to prevent and control crime. In the fall of 2000, the Carabineros began implementing the “Plan Cuadrante,” or Quadrant Plan, which has three elements: 1) increased presence of the Carabineros on the street, 2) revised human resource management systems, and 3) a new way of measuring performance based on a set of objective, quantifiable indicators. Although the plan does not call for a more community-oriented policing style, some observers say it is the first step in bringing the Carabineros and communities closer together. Others warn that the plan only increases the Carabineros’ capacity to carry out traditional—even repressive—law enforcement strategies.

It is not yet possible to discuss any outcomes of the Plan Cuadrante because it is so new. However, the mere fact that Carabineros have engaged in a process to improve and modernize their institution is a step that seemed far less possible only a few years ago. For those interested in bringing about more open, accountable, and democratic policing in Chile, the Carabineros’ plan—even if it fails to produce much change in front-line police work—gives them hope that the institution is willing to respond to new ideas.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: WHO IS INVOLVED IN POLICE REFORM?

Police reform efforts can be strengthened by the involvement of multiple actors: the police force itself; civil society (including NGOs, research organizations, community groups, the media, and individual citizens); and government or state authorities.⁷ Police-led reforms, such as in Chile, can better address citizens’ concerns when they consult with civil society (directly or through associations that represent them) to find out what they

want. State-sponsored reforms such as those in Buenos Aires province, even when there is great political will behind the changes, can be stalled without the involvement of multiple ranks of the police organization. Of course, every situation is different; there is no specific combination of actors or minimum level of involvement that will guarantee the success of police reforms. For historical and political reasons, it is not always possible for all three, or even a combination of these actors, to work together in Latin America.

1. Police. The locus for police reform is the police organization itself. Even in a deficient police organization, some members will have technical expertise about crime control, extensive knowledge of the communities where they work, and experience running their own organizations—and many will simply be motivated to improve their self-image and level of professionalism. Ultimately, police determine whether reforms succeed and endure, since they must carry them out and live with the resulting changes.

Modifications within the police organization require strong leadership and the courage to adopt innovative policies. But even when changes are led by police commanders, other parts of the organization may try to block them.⁸ Police reform must offer something positive for police, and that is best assured when multiple ranks from the public security forces participate in the reforms.

2. State or Government. Although it is difficult to sustain state-sponsored initiatives without the support from police, the state can confer political legitimacy on new initiatives and, when necessary, allocate funding for them. When crime or police misconduct is severe, and when the departmental initiative to address these problems is weak, the role of the state may have to be amplified.⁹ However, in such cases the tendency is often to propose radical solutions for sometimes intractable problems. What happened in Buenos Aires illustrates the potential problem of politician-led police reform. A change in the political administration may result in funding cuts and programmatic shifts that cancel out, or even reverse, the reforms.

3. Civil Society. Public perception of the police and crime—whether real or exaggerated—is often



the impetus for police reform. Consultation with local citizens' committees and neighborhood watch groups helps police target their activities and allows state officials to shape policies for public security that meet society's expectations.

While there may be few ways for average citizens to contribute to processes of police reform, there are many NGOs and community organizations that can articulate public concerns about crime and police abuse. Police overlook the potential of these groups to organize residents and merchants around crime prevention activities.

Police also stand to gain from partnerships with researchers, who can lend expertise and skills. In Minas Gerais, for example, the Center for Studies of Crime and Public Safety at the Federal University has helped the Military Police collect and interpret crime data. Based on this information, the police have changed their deployment patterns and enforcement strategies to better target crime.

The lessons from different police reform experiences would be useful for police reformers, but they are hard to come by in Latin America. While the body of literature on policing in the region is growing rapidly, there is still a dearth of evaluations measuring the impact of police reforms. Clearly, there are many approaches to police reform in Latin America. Some police organizations in the region have adopted elements of policing models developed in other countries, such as community policing, and through trial and error they have tailored them to the local realities. Some police commanders have offered their own innovations, and still others continue to draw from the same old menu of police strategies without knowing for sure how well they are working. Lessons from all these experiences—when shared among reform-minded police leaders, government officials, and citizens—would go a long way toward advancing better policing practices in the democracies of Latin America.

ENDNOTES

¹ Morrison, Andrew, Mayra Buvinic and Michael Shifter, "The Violent Americas? Risk Factors, Consequences and Policy Implications of Social and Domestic Violence," in *Crime and Violence in Latin America: Citizen Security, Democracy and the State*, edited by Hugo Frühling and Joseph Tulchin with Heather A. Golding, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, publication forthcoming (authors' calculations based on Pan American Health Organization data).

² Stone, Christopher E. and Heather H. Ward, "Democratic Policing: A Framework for Action," *Policing & Society*, vol. 10, number 1, 2000, pp. 11-12.

³ Saín, Marcelo, "Democracia, seguridad pública y policía. La reforma del sistema de seguridad y policial en la provincia de Buenos Aires," working paper presented at the seminar on police reform in Argentina organized by the Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales in Buenos Aires, December 1-2, 1998.

⁴ Beato, Claudio, November 6, 2000.

⁵ Beato, Cláudio, electronic correspondence, May 14, 2001.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See Stone and Ward.

⁸ Stone and Ward, p. 19.

⁹ Stone and Ward, p. 30.

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