

## Community Policing in the Southern Cone: Results, Problems, Policies

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In recent decades, most Latin American societies have experienced an increase in citizen insecurity, felt both in terms of rising crime rates and the public's perception of an escalating problem. The vital importance of the issue has made it a part of both citizen and government agendas. However, despite a consensus regarding the public character of the problem, as well as a shared feeling that citizen insecurity is increasing, policy responses have been less than uniform and, at times, contradictory.

Many countries have developed policies to address deficiencies in the penal system and expand the punitive capacities of the security forces, such as increasing the severity of criminal sentences, reducing the age of legal responsibility, and enhancing police presence. At the same time, the general loss of confidence in the integrity of the police as an institution during the 1990s has led to a barrage of proposals for implementing reform programs in the region. A large quantity of these have included community policing programs inspired by the policy experiments attempted during the 1980s in the United States, Canada, and Europe.<sup>1</sup> These two policy approaches, one targeting punitive measures and the other preventative, have led to different results. This paper will examine the implications of each by looking at (1) the effect of these policies on community policing; (2) various problems these programs have encountered in the region; and (3) other policy measures that could bolster the success of these programs in the future.

### COMMUNITY POLICING: QUALIFYING CONDITIONS

One of the motivations for designing alternative policing projects has been the fact that the traditional "professional" model, based on the use of increasingly repressive measures,<sup>2</sup> is clearly

outdated and ineffective. The purpose of these alternative models of policing has been not only to control crime, but to promote public peace and security.

Implementing the community policing model involves a number of changes: (1) expanding the traditional mandate of the police; (2) greater emphasis on the preventive, as opposed to the reactive role of the police; (3) inclusion of strategies for local action; and (4) incorporation of mechanisms for cooperation between the police, political officials, public service providers, and members of the community.

Experiences from Europe and the United States have shown that implementing the community model requires a series of changes in the organizational structure of the police forces. In order to establish a positive relationship with the citizens and provide for local decision-making capacities, police organizations have had to decentralize their procedures and alter their vertical command structure. The overall police force has had to be transformed into smaller, local units in order to establish an increased community presence and greater visibility. To gain the confidence of the people and, in turn, encourage their involvement in security issues, it also has been necessary to create instruments that allow the community to monitor police activities. Thus, one byproduct of these programs has been to strengthen external mechanisms for monitoring police conduct, resulting in increased institutional transparency.



Dr. Catalina Smulovitz, during a visit to the Wilson Center.



As seen from international experiences with community policing, the design of programs requires certain conditions. However, the imposition of two different, and often conflicting, policy models has hindered attempts to foster these qualifying characteristics in many countries in the region. Governments are implementing measures to monitor police and to limit the degree to which police may exercise discretionary powers, while, at the same time, they also are expanding police powers to employ punitive measures.

The first policy seeks to increase citizen participation, based on the premise that security will be possible only with cooperation between those responsible for providing protection and those in need of protection. The second measure, on the other hand, is based on the belief that protection is solely the duty of the police, rather than a shared responsibility. This approach, in turn, reinforces the adversarial relationship and lack of trust between police and citizens. While there has not been a detailed assessment of community policing programs in the region as a whole, the few evaluations that have been conducted tend to indicate that one of the problems in implementing these programs relates to the adoption of such contradictory policies.

### PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS: THE CASES OF ARGENTINA AND BRAZIL

A review of data from the few existing evaluations of community policing projects in some of the Southern Cone countries, namely Brazil and Argentina, will allow a preliminary consideration of the effects from these programs.

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The Woodrow Wilson Center's Citizen Security Project is supported by a generous grant from the Hewlett Foundation.

Latin American Program Director: Joseph S. Tulchin  
 Citizen Security Project Coordinator: Heather A. Golding  
 Editing: Amelia Brown  
 Layout: Craig M. Fagan

Community policing in São Paulo by Paulo de Mesquita Neto indicates that there has been no decrease in the overall number of crimes, nor, specifically, in the number of homicides since the implementation of a community policing program.<sup>3</sup> This same trend, Neto finds, is evident in Jardim Angela, one of the city's neighborhoods cited by the police as a successful example of community policing. Moreover, community policing has not resulted in a reduction in the population's perception of insecurity or in the number of complaints concerning police violence, or corruption. According to Neto, surveys conducted in 1999 showed that despite the implementation of community policing measures, confidence in the police had continued to decline.

The study emphasizes that the greatest change has been in the organizational development and structure of the police. There have been noticeable changes in the police's public discourse, in the creation of new internal agencies (i.e., Department of Community Policing and Human Rights), and in professional retraining to emphasize the importance of community policing and the need to limit the use of force.

Experiences in community policing in Argentina have not been evaluated as rigorously as those in Brazil. However, some data do exist. Available information on the results of a community policing experiment in the neighborhood of Saavedra—an experiment described by analysts as a pioneering model—indicates problems similar to those in Neto's study. According to data provided by members of the Alerta de Saavedra [Saavedra Watch] program, there has been no reduction in crime in the neighborhood.<sup>4</sup> Although there are no data on people's perceptions of insecurity or on the number of complaints concerning police misconduct, violence or corruption, residents involved in the program have expressed greater confidence in the police. Program participants mentioned encountering problems in working cooperatively with the police and with other local and neighborhood government agencies in addressing certain issues.

Like in the São Paulo case, the greatest change in Saavedra seems to be in making residents a part of the public policy discussion on security issues, as well as in fostering their participation in monitoring local security. In both cases, however, the residents indicate a low level of participation by members of the local community and express serious doubt about the ability to ensure the continuity of the instituted programs.

### FINAL COMMENTS: PROBLEMS TO ADDRESS AND POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

This section considers some of the problems encountered in implementing community policing programs, as well as possible issues that future policy will need to address.

*Trust.* As mentioned before, one of the requirements for implementing community policing programs is that the community and the police collaborate in solving security problems. This collaboration requires trust between the police and members of the community; in fact, trust is an essential condition for the success of these programs. However, as shown by numerous surveys conducted on countries of the region, the relationship between the police and the community usually is characterized by mutual distrust. Given that there are historical explanations for this sentiment, it is clear that it cannot be changed overnight: the fact that some of those involved in introducing alternative forms of policing may demonstrate goodwill is not enough to ensure the program's success. Therefore, in order to implement community policing programs successfully, it is necessary first to take measures to raise and consolidate long-term trust between the police and community.

Consequently, policies are required to create conditions conducive to sustaining community policing programs over time. Programs need time to mature in order to allow trust to develop between the relevant parties. To provide enough time for this process, steps should be taken to insulate programs from short-term policy swings. One way to do this is to protect their funding from unpredictable political decisions.

Another method to increase trust is through better transparency. Knowledge of police routines, practices, and problems tends to dispel the suspicions that arise from police secretiveness, making it possible to begin building a relationship of mutual trust. Measures that facilitate and expand citizens' access to information would work both to build trust and improve the monitoring of police actions. Effective legislation is needed that would authorize free access to information and create institutional mechanisms for its guarantee. This greater transparency also would spur action by civil society associations to request further institutional changes.

*Restructuring of Police Forces.* Community policing theorists also have suggested that it is important to alter the organizational structure of police forces.<sup>5</sup> Two important modifications are essential.

First, there needs to be a change in the internal organization of the police institution itself, in order to provide greater autonomy to policemen on the beat. Second, to encourage collaboration and interaction with the community, the strict division of work between citizens and police officials—typical of the traditional police model—must be modified. As studies in Brazil and Argentina have shown, police tend to perceive these reforms as threatening, inasmuch as they diminish the specific functions of the police. Rather than implementing changes for internal reorganization designed to foster community collaboration and participation, the police have treated proposed changes as public relations measures.<sup>6</sup> This resistance from police agencies and leadership, which often view community policing programs as threats to their authority and resources, must be overcome if these programs are to be successful.

*Relations with Non-police Government Agencies.* Another regular source of problems for community policing programs is the lack of coordination between different government agencies, police forces, and members of the community. Since the community policing approach seeks to be proactive, rather than merely reactive and repressive, programs require various non-police governmental agencies to work in coordination to address the problems that each community identifies as a source of its insecurity.

In order to ensure the functioning of community policing programs, offices for outreach and coordination designed to address community demands have to be established. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the creation of coordination offices will not be sufficient in itself to meet community demands. Local government agencies that provide these services need to be institutionally obligated to respond to the community's concerns. In this sense, the functional relationships between representatives of each locality and the local government agencies must change. Unless this occurs, the accumulated demands which currently are directed at local government agencies will remain unaddressed, ultimately increasing the sense of dissatisfaction with these programs and undermining their support and sustainability.

*Citizen Participation.* Given that community policing programs depend, in part, on the participation of the residents, ongoing community involvement is essential for their long-term success. Furthermore, participation must include a wide and representative sample of the community.



If participation is limited to a small group within the community, the programs risk being co-opted by groups with stronger and particular interests. Therefore, it is important to consider policies that could help promote and maintain widespread community participation.

Such policies should focus on factors that: (1) have a direct, positive impact on the program's results; and (2) affect perceptions about solutions producing immediate effects. For example, advances in areas such as police restructuring or outreach efforts with other government agencies could increase continued participation in these programs. It also would be advisable to establish procedures to disseminate information about the achievements gained through the community's participation. These achievements are related not only to changes in local crime rates, but also those that yield successful solutions to local social problems, the implementation of youth programs,

training for the unemployed, and programs designed to monitor the activity of the police force, itself.

Participation in activities of this type—even if they do not produce spectacular results in terms of reduced crime rates—tends to diminish the perception of insecurity. This is important since improving people's sense of security is one of the primary goals of community policing programs. Inasmuch as these programs allow for active participation in finding solutions to the problem, they move citizens from being helpless victims of a frightening and widespread problem into being part of the solution. In such a scenario, it can be anticipated that citizens' participation, which was motivated by the urgency of the problem, will continue to be involved over time, since their involvement is perceived as the source of an unexpected benefit (namely, a reduction in feelings of insecurity).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See: H. Goldstein, *Problem-Oriented Policing*, New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1990; National Institute of Justice, *Perspectives on Policing*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 1988-1990; R. Trojanowicz and B. Bucqueroux, *Community Policing: How to Get Started*, Cincinnati, Ohio: Anderson, 1993. Laura Chinchilla and José Ma. Rico, *La prevención comunitaria del delito: Perspectivas para América Latina*, Center for the Administration of Justice, Miami, FL: Florida International University, 1997; and R. Neild, "Temas y debates en la reforma de la seguridad pública: Una guía para la sociedad civil," *Policía Comunitaria*, Washington, D.C.: Washington Office on Latin America, January 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Chinchilla indicates that major efforts were made in the United States during the 1950s to increase the professionalism of police forces. These efforts included creating communication centers, and incorporating motorized patrols and sophisticated equipment. The results, however, did not live up to expectations, with no improvement in either the crime rates or the perception of insecurity. Furthermore, an unwanted byproduct of these policies was to create more distance between the police and the community. See Chinchilla, Laura: "Policía

de Orientación Comunitaria. Una adecuada Alianza entre Policía y Comunidad para Revertir la Inseguridad," presentation at Inter-American Development Bank seminar, *Dialogues on Citizen Coexistence*, October 1999.

<sup>3</sup> The Nucleo de Estudos da Violencia and ILANUD also have carried out evaluations of community policing programs implemented in other localities. (See: Jaqueline Muniz, Sean Patrick Larvie, Leonardo Musumeci, and Bianca Freire: "Resistencia e dificuldades de um programa de policiamento comunitário," *Tempo Social Revista, Sociologica*, May 1997. Leonarda Musumeci (coord.), "Policiamento Comunitario em Copacabana: primeiro relatório parcial," Núcleo de Pesquisa ISER, Rio de Janeiro, February 1995. The conclusions of these studies are similar to those reached in the case of São Paulo.

<sup>4</sup> See data on the web page:

[http://members.tripod.com/~Daniel\\_E\\_Cantoni/base.htm](http://members.tripod.com/~Daniel_E_Cantoni/base.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Waddington, P.A.J.: *Policing Citizens* (London: University College London Press: 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Eilbaum, Lucía: "La Policía Al Servicio De La Comunidad. Viejas Prácticas Policiales Y Nuevas Políticas," Undergraduate Dissertation, Universidad de Buenos Aires. March 2000.

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