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WOLA ■ WASHINGTON OFFICE ON LATIN AMERICA

# THEMES AND DEBATES IN PUBLIC SECURITY REFORM

A manual for civil society

## Community Policing

Rachel Neild

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## Themes and Debates in Public Security Reform Introduction to the Series

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The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) has monitored police abuse and U.S. and international police assistance since our founding in 1974. Peace processes and political transitions set the stage for efforts to reform public security functions, demilitarize internal security, professionalize police forces and increase democratic accountability for security policies. In El Salvador, Haiti and Guatemala, large-scale reform processes have been undertaken and have received significant support from the United States and the international community. More than any other region, Central America and Haiti have been a testing ground for international assistance for post-conflict security reforms.

As WOLA monitored the evolution of police reform in the region, we became convinced that the long-term consolidation of the police as a professional, effective, and apolitical institution depends on developing greater citizen involvement in and support for public security reforms. Reform processes are taking place in the context of dramatic increases in crime and face constant resistance and challenges from authoritarian sectors. Without a strong domestic constituency for police reform, these processes may founder. To support civil society organizations in the region seeking to engage with issues of citizen security, WOLA launched the “Advocacy Training Program for Police and Judicial Reform” in Central America in 1996 with support from PRODECA.

*Themes and Debates in Public Security Reform* aims to make the issues of public security reform more accessible to civil society organizations. This series examines selected key aspects of police reform, drawing on lessons from Central America, the United States, and the world. Each section frames the debates on the issues, provides examples of how issues have emerged and been resolved in different contexts, and offers examples of civil society advocacy for police reform. *Themes and Debates* also explores how key actors have affected police reform in various countries, including the role of international donors, national decision-making structures, and civil society. The series includes:

1. Police Recruitment
2. Police Training
3. Internal Controls and Disciplinary Units
4. External Controls
- 5. Community Policing**
6. Criminal Investigations
7. International Police Assistance

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## COMMUNITY POLICING

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Community policing has become the new mantra of law enforcement across the world, yet practices that are termed community policing vary so widely that some experts say the term has become a meaningless catch-all. Within the parameters of community policing fall programs that range from efforts aiming to improve the public image of the police to profound operational and structural changes to advance community-police collaboration to identify and solve problems in the community. The best community policing programs emphasize substantive community participation with police to identify safety problems, set priorities, and hold the police accountable for addressing the issues identified. Along the way, such programs often improve community trust in and cooperation with police in solving crimes.

Police reform processes, especially those creating entirely or largely new forces, face the challenge of developing a new relationship with the population. This poses a formidable challenge in countries with traditions of military dominance, where police and public security functions have long served to preserve and protect the interests of political and economic elites. Most citizens' encounters with police have been characterized by animosity or abuse, and the public lacks any experience of cooperation with police. In this context, community policing may offer useful insights into ways to change the nature of police-community relations in Latin America, particularly in poor neighborhoods where police have never played a protective role. At the same time, the clear danger of community policing is that it may be used as a tool for social control or for local *caudillos* -- strongmen or "party bosses" -- to maintain their dominance. Models from other contexts must be examined with these questions in mind, and issues of replicability considered carefully, particularly for a Latin American context.

There is a large and growing body of literature on community policing, though unfortunately most of it is in English. This section outlines the emergence of community policing in the United States; then summarizes the different police practices and policies that are elements of different community policing programs; outlines debates about the merits and achievements of community policing; and points to some of the issues raised in considering these practices for Latin American contexts.

### **1. The Emergence of Community Policing in the United States**

Many early immigrants to the United States were fleeing repression, and at first created self-policing communities rather than develop police forces. However, as U.S. cities grew during the early 1800s, they came to require specialized public security functions. Local, elected civilian authorities created state, country and municipal police forces under their control,

modeled internally on a military hierarchy. Over time, many municipal police forces became highly politicized and corrupt.

In an effort to end police corruption and brutality, the progressive movement advocated for police professionalization over a period roughly spanning the 1930s to 1950s. Reforms focused on strengthening command and control and police management to clearly define their mandate as law enforcement and to establish the principle of unity of command in order to eliminate ambiguity about the chain of authority. (Kelling, Wasserman, and Williams 1988) Five basic features of this model -- the "bureaucratic model" -- are: (1) a high degree of specialization of tasks; (2) a hierarchical structure; (3) a top-down flow of authority; (4) a high degree of behavior based on strict conformity with rules; and (5) a high degree of behavior based on considerations of rank and hierarchy. (Kuykendall and Roberg, cited in Zhao 1996) Operationally, preventive patrol and criminal investigation became the backbone of police work. Police sought to confront increases in crime or changes in crime patterns by improving their technological capabilities, particularly their mobility, communications and weaponry.

A central element of the bureaucratic model is the separation of police from their broader environment in order to remove political influence. While it did not end all problems with U.S. police forces, this strategy did reduce the political control of police officers, reduce police corruption, improve the quality and training of police, constrain police use of deadly force, and distribute police services more equitably in the community. However, it also created highly autonomous institutions with limited community contact and interaction with other institutions providing social services.

It became increasingly clear from the 1960s onwards that the bureaucratic model was not preventing a rise in crime, particularly in inner cities. Technological advances were reducing police contact with the public as police spent more and more time in high-tech-equipped cars. Police crime-fighting tactics often increased tensions with minority urban communities, resulting in accusations of discrimination and abuse, deteriorating community-police relations, lack of community cooperation with police in fighting or solving crime and increased fear in the communities. Community policing emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as police recognized that their tactics were not only failing to address crime but were also, in some cases, increasing levels of fear and contributing to civil disturbances (riots in the late 1960s in cities throughout the United States, and in Los Angeles in 1992 following the Rodney King trial, were triggered by police abuse). (Police Foundation 1993)

Analysts note two larger social developments that contributed to the emergence of community policing. In the United States, as the civil rights movement brought African-American leaders to leadership positions in communities throughout the United States, they brought a police reform agenda that sought to address both police abuse and the high crime rates afflicting black communities. These black officials embraced community policing and, in their recruitment of police chiefs, sought out police sympathetic to community policing.

From the other end of the ideological spectrum, another factor underlying the adoption of community policing was the redefinition and reduction of the role of the state, particularly federal government, that came to the fore in the 1980s. Debates about decentralization and privatization created an environment that challenged all state agencies to increase their efficiency

and responsiveness. Police were challenged to maximize their cost-effectiveness, running themselves more like a business and listening to the perspectives of their “customers” -- the public. (Shearing) The bureaucratic model was very expensive, as the only solutions it offered to rising crime were to purchase more expensive technologies and hire more police. Community policing offered the potential for “customer” input and more cost-effective crime prevention approaches based on managing the problems that produce crime, working cooperatively to resolve them with communities themselves and other government agencies.

It should be noted that parallel with the development of community policing, other very punitive approaches to law enforcement have been adopted in the United States. Both federal and state governments have passed laws increasing penalties for certain crimes, particularly drug-related crimes; have passed mandatory sentencing guidelines, reducing judges’ discretion in sentencing; and passed laws such as “three strikes and you’re out,” by which conviction for a third felony automatically results in a life sentence, irrespective of the severity of the offence.

The United States has the most decentralized model of policing in the world, with some 20,000 police forces ranging in size from one-person departments to the New York City police department with 32,000 personnel. The U.S. “model” is of limited use for Latin America, where, other than the federal systems in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, a single national police force is the norm (or a national preventive police and national judicial police). Outside the United States, a high degree of police centralization is common and generally justified by arguments of economy, efficiency, and uniformity of police policy and practice. But centralization has not impeded community policing. In countries ranging from Singapore and the Netherlands to Australia and France, police have implemented community policing practices.

## **2. What is Community Policing?**

“community policing is a philosophy, not a tactic”

Kenneth Fortier, ex-Police Chief of Riverside, California

Community policing implies changing the conception of the role of police in society. The most basic question about policing is “ who defines what order is to be maintained and how it is to be maintained?” Community policing refers to some arrangements for policing that give a significant role to “the community” in defining and guiding the performance of policing in their locality. This is based on the democratic principle “that anyone who exercises authority on behalf of the community is accountable to the community for the exercise of that authority.” (Stenning 1984)

This definition of community policing is extremely difficult for many police to accept. Adopting a community policing philosophy implies that the police must be willing to share responsibility with the community, to accept criticism, and to share power. Furthermore, community policing goes beyond changing the external practice of the police and has a direct impact on their internal organization. For example, if a police department decides to create foot patrols and neighborhood beat police, but gives them a lower pay scale and does not promote

them based on their effectiveness in assisting the community to solve local problems, those police will rapidly become apathetic and passive.

Key elements of community policing include community crime prevention; patrol deployment for non-emergency interaction with the community; active solicitation by police of requests for public service; and the provision of opportunities for feed-back from the communities about police operations. (Bayley 1984) Four essential assumptions of the community policing model are that:

1. Neighborhoods or small communities should serve as locations of police organization and operation;
2. Urban policing should be organized and conducted at the community or neighborhood level;
3. Communities have unique and distinctive policing problems that conventional police organizations and responses do not address; and
4. Community consensus should guide police response to the community's crime and order problems. (Murphy, cited in Zhao 1996)

Among the operational elements typical of different community policing programs are:

- police department-sponsored neighborhood or block watches
- business watch meetings
- crime prevention newsletters
- crime education for the public
- storefront police stations
- promotion of civilian volunteer liaison with community
- community identification of local problems (through surveys, town meetings or other means)
- foot patrols
- special problem-solving task units
- increased attention to minor offenses that are major annoyances to local residents
- more minority hiring
- increased education level of police
- permanent assignment of officers to neighborhoods
  
- reassignment of certain management tasks from police personnel to civilian personnel
- addition of "master police officer" positions to increase rewards for line officers.

# Community Policing in the Netherlands

Faced with rising alienation between the police and the public, in the late 1970s the Dutch police began a program of decentralization and increased police-community interaction. Police in the Hague established a system of permanent beat officers who make sure the local people recognize them and can approach them. In addition, the Dutch police adopted several measures recommended by community policing advocates:

1. Informal **contact groups** comprised of precinct residents and local officers meet on a regular basis and discuss issues of concern to both the police and the communities they serve. Communication flourished and the police improved their understanding of what was actually going on at the street level.
2. **Precinct books** provide comprehensive descriptive and statistical information (i.e., demographics, crime statistics, socio-economic patterns) for each precinct. Officers use the books to familiarize themselves with the communities they patrol.
3. In order to make sure that police services fit the needs of the public, the police conduct **market research** to ascertain, in a systematic fashion, what those needs are and make sure that they are reflected when police policies are set, ensuring the highest possible public satisfaction.

As a whole, these tactics have contributed to a decrease in juvenile delinquency and have bolstered narcotics control

## 2.1 Some models of community policing

### 2.1. a Problem-oriented policing

Herman Goldstein, one of the best known community-policing scholars in the United States, notes that three phases can often be distinguished as police departments adopt community policing, which they typically do in an effort to increase community-police cooperation for crime solving. The first phase is characterized by activities such as initiating foot patrols and



community meetings. This is found to produce good results, so the police move to a second, or intermediate phase, decentralizing further and assigning agents to neighborhoods and working with the community in crime control. Sophisticated community policing comes in the third phase, in which police start to assist the community in defining its own problems and resolving them. In this third phase the police are engaged in “problem-oriented policing.” This model is based on the idea that police cannot solve all the problems that contribute to crime themselves, but can act as a link to other services.

In **Montreal**, Canada, only 30 percent of calls for police service (911) were about crime. These calls would be referred to a detective, while typically police did little or nothing about the other 70 percent. Dispatchers received training in how to screen 911 calls and refer them to the appropriate services.

### **2.1. b “Broken windows” / Order maintenance policing**

Another approach that is much-discussed in the United States is known as “Broken windows” (also called order maintenance policing). “Broken windows” is based on the theory that a neighborhood that looks run-down invites crime. Relatively small problems, such as abandoned cars or buildings, graffiti, and panhandlers, create an environment that encourages more serious crime. Under this model, police use loitering and vagrancy laws more aggressively to move beggars and drug dealers off corners. Police also notify other authorities in charge of housing or public works, and get them to remove trash and improve lighting, thus improving the appearance of the neighborhood and reducing fear.

In **Denver**, police adopted a strategy of “directed patrols” which used crime analyses to identify and target areas with high incidences of crime. Officers would conduct saturation patrols in those areas, seeking out individuals with known reputations and arresting them for minor violations. This model focused on decentralization of command authority and aggressive proactive policing for order maintenance that many would not define as community policing, though it clearly falls within the realm of the “broken windows/order maintenance” policing. (Bayley 1984)

**Zero tolerance**, an extreme version of “broken windows,” entails police making arrests for most or all minor violations rather than using their discretion as to whether to ignore the infraction, issue a warning or make an arrest in any particular case. Massive arrests for minor offenses can

# Boston: Combining Problem-Oriented Policing

## with Targeted Zero Tolerance

In 1990, Boston experienced a record number of homicides -- 152, including 18 schoolchildren -- many linked to drugs. The catalyst for the initiation of a community policing response was a near riot in a church during the funeral of a young shooting victim. Black church leaders' attention to police issues had previously focused on denouncing police racism and abuse, but this incident brought a renewed concern with the impact of crime on their neighborhoods. Church leaders turned to the police seeking a collaborative and non-paternalistic response. The police worked with community organizations, churches and schools, and an array of governmental agencies to create "Operation Cease Fire" targeting at-risk youth. Police met with community leaders one neighborhood at a time in "neighborhood joint task forces" which identified priorities and strategies for public security in every neighborhood of the city. Police then incorporated these local strategies into a city-wide strategy.

This process identified "hot spots" of gang activity and high-risk youth and developed tactics to eliminate gang activities. Police and community leaders together meet with high-risk kids, both to send the message that neither the police nor the community will tolerate continued delinquency and to offer the kids help to change their ways. This approach makes clear to the gang members and other at-risk kids that they are known and that their community will not protect them from the police, but that they have options. The targeted youths are given a set of rules they must obey, such as not carrying weapons or associating with gang members. They may also be offered services such as drug treatment and back-to-school programs. At the same time, they

reduce the level of disorder in a neighborhood, leading to a reduction in more serious crime (the “broken windows” theory) or can reduce crime if, in detaining so many people on minor charges, among them police catch individuals wanted for more serious offenses. There are serious risks of discrimination and violation of rights associated with zero tolerance policing (see discussion of accountability at 3.c. below), but it can be effective if focused on particular crime issues or high-crime neighborhoods.

The adoption of community policing does not generally require changes in police laws and regulations. Within these broad regulatory frameworks, however, community policing does have major implications for institutional management. Community policing implies greater generalization of skills and work assignments for police on the beat, decentralization of organizational structures, and increased authority for local police commanders. It is also important that successful identification and resolving of problems by local police be recognized and rewarded by the institution. (Zhao 1996) Additional training in topics police do not normally learn at the police academy, such as housing regulations and the roles and responsibilities of different agencies, may also be useful, particularly to support a “problem-solving” model of community policing. However, U.S. police departments have not emphasized training as a vital bridge to adopting community policing so much as allowing and encouraging greater creativity from police on the beat to identify problems, figure out possible solutions, carry out research if necessary, and then giving the officer the authority to implement the solution.

Community policing programs often require technical support other than training. For example, recognizing that increasing the discretion of the police on the beat can create many situations where the limits of the police’s authority are not well defined; as a result, in Baltimore, police have legal counsel on call 24 hours a day to advise them about their legal limits. During other community policing initiatives, police departments have sought the assistance of think tanks and academic centers to assist in the design and analysis of citizen surveys. (Goldstein 1990)

Community policing is first and foremost a crime prevention effort. It does not replace reactive policing to arrest and convict criminals after the commission of crimes. Side by side with community policing, investigative police and other special squads continue with their normal functions. Successful community policing can enhance these other police functions if, by building greater trust between the police and the population, it increases cooperation with police in criminal investigations and other operations.

In **Detroit**, in 1976, at a time when the force was reduced from 6,000 to 4,000 police, the police launched a crime prevention effort based on opening 52 mini-police stations, each open for 12 hours a day. Each mini-station was run by one officer who would spend half time on patrol and half time in community organizing; these officers recruited local volunteers to help staff the mini-station during their absences. (The mini-stations did not respond to emergencies, which continued to be handled through traditional emergency-response lines.) Police also created a crime prevention section that organized

neighborhood watches and business watches. The police would also conduct door-to-door visits to apartments and houses to talk with citizens about their concerns rather than waiting until people were desperate enough to seek out the police. (Bayley 1984)

### **3. Debates and Concerns about Community Policing**

#### **3.1 Police resistance and leadership**

The most typical reason that community policing programs fail is police resistance. Much police resistance reflects reluctance to abandon set habits and practices. But, as the discussion above indicates, community policing implies a fundamental change in the concept of police professionalism, defined as police being the experts in crime fighting who therefore know the best tactics and responses and impart those to the community. Community policing threatens to erode police autonomy. At the extreme, police see this as approaching vigilantism and reintroducing the threat of politicization to public security functions.

In **Los Angeles**, the police department created community policing advisory boards in each of the city's 18 divisions. The members of the boards were picked by the division captains and were unrepresentative of community membership. Efforts to broaden participation were resisted by the police on the grounds that it would politicize the boards. This effort is ongoing and reportedly improving. (Novick 1996)

Police may accept those elements of community policing where they see clear benefits and then resist going any further. Elements of community policing have clear advantages for public relations exercises or even to organize politically for improved wages and resources. In serious community policing, community consultation must be understood as the beginning of a process, not as an end in itself. The police must be prepared to change in response to the views of the committee and consultation with the community.

In **Australia**, the police established community consultative committees to reach out to communities, in particular aboriginal, ethnic groups and youth. The impact of these committees on police practice was limited. In the worst cases, the police would say that they were consulting with the community, but would simply ignore their views and not change any aspect of police behavior as a result. (O'Rawe and Moore 1997)

Analysts note that the introduction of community policing implies a long-term reform process that seeks to change institutional culture over time. Community policing implies not just changing operational procedures, but adapting administrative structures such as assignments, benefits and promotions systems to reward police for initiative and creativity, not just the number of arrests or convictions they achieve. Police leaders will need to adapt recruitment and training to emphasize communication and resourcefulness, and should create a process to reassign and gradually remove those officers who are not suited to community policing. (Goldstein 1990; Kelling, Wasserman, and Williams 1998) Political and police leadership and commitment are vital to initiate and maintain reform processes of these dimensions. These

processes are likely to take considerable time; some experts talk in terms of decades. This perspective sits uncomfortably with the finding that rank and file police will accept the program much faster if they see concrete results in terms of crime control.

### **3.2 Community trust and engagement**

Community policing assumes that the public wants a partnership with police. This is often not the case. Particularly in situations where community policing is being adopted in part to respond to poor or abysmal police-community relations, the police may need to demonstrate that they are worthy partners. In the United States, one tactic police have adopted to win community engagement is to increase their local hard-core crime fighting, focusing attention on a small, targeted area, such as a gang problem, and then bringing in other services.

In **Baltimore**, the police conducted a major anti-crime sweep of a community, designed to target identified crime problems and not antagonize the local population, and afterwards brought in public services to improve lighting, tear down some derelict houses, clear trash, etc. Afterwards, the local people took charge and chased away drug dealers themselves. Neighboring communities observed the changes and requested similar programs. A measure of success is that now most of the calls police get are not about drug dealers but about trash.<sup>2</sup>

Other common issues arising around community engagement are:

- overcoming community skepticism and the sense that they have heard it all before;
- overcoming initial public perceptions that the approach is soft on crime;
- providing the resources and structures that are required for the community to put these theories into practice, especially with the social services required by problem-oriented policing approaches; and
- overcoming people's fears that they will face reprisals by criminals if they cooperate with the police.

Another paradox noted by scholars and practitioners of community policing is that it is often well-organized and cohesive communities, which need community policing least, where these practices will be easiest to implement. One of the challenges to community policing is that the populations that often commit most crimes (or are perceived as doing so), such as youth and minorities, are also the victims of most police abuse and the most disorganized.

### **3.3 Accountability**

Early police reforms in the United States sought to improve police accountability by professionalizing crime fighting and increasing the distance between police and community leaders. In contrast, community policing seeks to make the police more accountable to community needs by reducing that social distance. In many cases, community policing has improved relations and public-police cooperation. Nonetheless, police accountability activists in

the United States are disturbed by a new phenomenon: when they call for measures to address police abuse, the police response is to initiate a community policing program that calls on the community to support the police and portrays any other activity as divisive.

At a fundamental level, serious community policing efforts that go beyond public relations require that police leaders and the community trust the police to do their job without abusing that trust. If a police force suffers from serious problems of corruption and/or abuse, those issues must be addressed in order to initiate community policing. In Riverside, California, local authorities brought in a new police chief to reform their department and improve police-community relations, which were very poor. The new chief found serious corruption issues and fired 15 police and prosecuted 8 as he initiated a community policing program.<sup>3</sup>

While community policing is often portrayed as the “progressive model” and therefore linked to concerns about police abuse and accountability, it is in reality a crime prevention strategy (or set of strategies) that can be implemented in different fashions with different levels of emphasis on accountability and abuse issues. For example, certain models of community policing are criticized as having increased police abuse, or at least racial discrimination. The New York City police department adopted a “zero tolerance/broken windows” approach, with efforts focused on improving the quality of life in the neighborhood and aggressively moving out problem elements. The impact has been criticized as falling heavily on black and other minority populations, and complaints against the police increased by 24 percent in the first three months of 1998. By contrast, following Boston’s more targeted zero tolerance campaign with its high level of community participation, complaints against the police dropped. (Hentoff 1998)

One of the most common criticisms of community policing programs is that they do not in fact make the police more responsive to the community, but rather increase police control over the community. Many community policing programs are criticized for being too “top-down.” When the police retain traditional crime fighting approaches with community policing as an “add-on,” rather than seeing community policing as an equally important crime-prevention and crime-fighting strategy, it is very hard to establish an equal partnership between police and residents of a disadvantaged community. Reflecting concerns about the potential for abuse in community policing, some activists from the U.S. civil rights community argue that the creation of a civilian review board to process complaints against the police should constitute a central element of all community policing programs.

### **3.4 Evaluation**

Until recently, evaluations of community policing programs have been limited and dispersed with few major comparative evaluations undertaken. While specific community policing programs do appear to have significant impacts on crime, at least over the short term, a major comparative evaluation conducted by the University of Maryland found that “there is no evidence that community policing per se reduces crime without a clear focus on a crime risk factor objective.” The same study goes on to conclude that “directed patrols and programs targeted on criminogenic substances like guns and alcohol can be effective in attacking crime hot-spots.” (Sherman 1997) While the study notes that further evaluations are required, it finds

that evidence to date indicates that problem-oriented policing strategies are promising in terms of their impact in reducing crime. (This 500 page study, *Preventing Crime, What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising*, can be downloaded from the internet at <http://www.ncjrs.org/works/index.htm>) Though many scholars note that crime is a product of so many factors that police action alone is always limited, if not marginal, in its impact on crime rates, that study found that community policing programs do have a significant impact in reducing fear or the perception of crime in a community. The study also found that community policing has most often been adopted and is most effective in inner-city environments characterized by poverty, social fragmentation and high crime, particularly juvenile crime.

Evaluating crime prevention strategies such as community policing is more complex than traditional assessments of law enforcement that have tallied arrests, convictions, reported crimes and so on. Evaluations of community policing have to focus on the outcome of the program, and cannot rely on quantitative analyses of the process. While they do need to address changes in crime rates, particularly in areas targeted by the program, evaluations must also consider the level of community satisfaction, fear reduction and other less tangible products of improved community relations. Indeed, in some cases, the number of crimes reported to the police has increased following the introduction of community policing as a result of increased community-police dialogue and trust, creating the statistical appearance of an increase in crime when in fact the rise in reports is an indicator of success in improving relations.

All evaluations of community policing should engage the community itself in a central fashion. A common evaluative tool has been citizen surveys. In the United States, the federal government has provided significant funding for community policing with few requirements for evaluation, so the police simply describe their programs with no community input into the assessment.

Experts caution that we should have realistic expectations of community policing. These programs only produce slight reductions in crime, but do reduce citizens' fear and improve attitudes toward the police. Police morale can also improve as relations with the community improve. However, these results typically occur at the start of the program when it is novel; as it becomes ordinary, things may return to status quo ante. (Chinchilla and Rico 1997)

#### **4. Can Community Policing be Employed in a Latin American Context?**

In most Latin American countries, policing is an activity that maintains a status quo in which large sectors of the population are politically marginalized and denied state services. This poses clear problems for the adoption of community policing in Latin America, for "[n]o community can be expected willingly or enthusiastically to participate in the policing of an order which it does not see as consistent with its own interests as a community." (Stenning 1984) Police have been taught that the poor are the problem, and for the police to shift their attitudes to

help the poor resolve their problems is a huge leap. In the South of the United States, following the passage of the Civil Rights Act, it became clear that major changes in police leadership would be necessary in many police departments as the old personnel who had enforced “Jim Crow” laws were not capable of making the shift to policing in a non-discriminatory fashion and enforcing equal rights. For Latin America, the implication is that community policing must reflect some larger political commitment to broadening democratic practice that is credible to the population. It cannot solely be an effort to improve the credibility or legitimacy of the police.

#### **4.1 Institutional characteristics of Latin American police**

Almost all community policing models require significant changes in police skills and management: decentralization of authority, increasing the decision making powers and discretionary realm of patrol officers and line supervisors, restructuring rewards and incentives, prioritizing communication and creativity, and so on. All of these attributes go against the institutional culture and organization of Latin American police forces.

Most Latin American police forces have highly militarized structures with rigid command and control hierarchies which emphasize due obedience and physical prowess over analytical and communicative capabilities; some police are still under direct military control and many still live in barracks rather than have a civilian lifestyle; and most police have limited educational levels (illiteracy is an issue in many police forces). These characteristics present serious obstacles to implementing many of the basic practices of community policing. On the positive side, many Latin American police have developed their own tactics and approaches to solving problems that may be useful to community policing.

Given these characteristics of Latin American police forces, it seems even more likely that there will be police resistance to efforts to implement community policing. This was the case in Chile, where a modest effort to increase police-community consultation in three neighborhoods never got off the ground because of police resistance. Similarly, one of the better-known community policing efforts in the region ran into serious problems with a change in police leadership.

In **Brazil** in the early 1990s, in the wake of police assassinations of street children and increasing concerns with the impact of crime on Rio’s image and business potential, a project called *Viva Rio* implemented a community policing program in Copacabana with participation of police, churches, business and others. Sixty police with high-school-level education who were relatively new recruits received special training and were deployed to regular beats. Among other things, police worked with street children to organize them to wash cars. The effort reduced muggings and brought down car theft rates slightly. As residents’ confidence in police increased, they provided police with more information and several small groups of drug vendors were disbanded. Although residents were reportedly pleased with the results, a new military police commander ended the program on grounds that it was “soft” on crime. He instated a system of



rewards, including pay raises of up to 150 percent for “bravery,” typically awarded to police for killing “suspects.”<sup>4</sup>

## **4.2 Obstacles to community engagement**

Poor and marginalized communities in Latin America face a number of hurdles in engaging with community policing programs. First, after suffering decades if not centuries of police abuse, they must enter into substantive dialogue with the police. Overcoming anger and mistrust will take serious commitment from a community and their engagement may easily collapse if police abuse that trust. Furthermore, as in the United States, those communities that seem most in need may be the most difficult to work with because of their lack of internal organization and representation. Many forms of community organization and mechanisms for mediation and internal conflict resolution fragment and collapse in the massive processes of urbanization that have taken place throughout the region over recent decades.

Community mistrust of the police in Latin America is graphically illustrated by studies of levels of cooperation with police. In the United States and Europe, 90 percent of crimes are denounced by the public; the police themselves identify only 10 percent.<sup>5</sup> A May 1996 poll in El Salvador found that only 24.4 percent of crime victims informed the PNC (National Civilian Police). The main reasons they gave were: that it did no good, 45 percent; fear of reprisals, 25.2 percent; lack of evidence, 9.5 percent; and the minor nature of the crime, 8.7 percent. More than half of the respondents said that the authorities do nothing anyway, and 48 percent said that the police were losing popular support and respect. (UCA poll, cited in Chinchilla y Rico 1997)

This mistrust of the police reflects the extreme imbalance in political weight and representation of different social sectors in Latin America where poor majorities are struggling to obtain basic citizenship rights, while economic and other elites regard the state as their personal purview. This reality does not necessarily make community policing impossible. Indeed, as noted above, in the United States community policing has most often been adopted and most often been successful in poor, minority communities who have long been marginalized from political decision-making. Nonetheless, the extreme inequities characteristic of Latin America raise the possibility that the benefits of community policing may be far greater for already well-organized sectors than for those poor and marginalized communities whose need is greater. At worst, community policing could simply offer another avenue for domination by elite interests.

In **Costa Rica**, in an area of the capital known as Hatillo, a community policing pilot project was launched to involve the community in the fight against crime. Four local police stations were created which provided permanent police patrol services -- both vehicle and foot patrols -- to increase police presence in the area. The project also created an Advisory Committee to the Precinct Commander, comprised of representatives of the community, sports clubs, teachers, the church, and the social service sector, who worked together to identify security problems and their possible solutions and to provide the proper follow-up. A year-end evaluation of the project offers the following statistics:

- the actual level of crime in Hatillo decreased 9.5 percent; moreover, while 70.6 percent of those polled estimated that crime had increased in the country, only 38 percent in the Hatillo neighborhood estimated an increase in crime
- the perception of insecurity decreased 16.8 percent, and the fear of being robbed at home decreased by 32 percent
- the poll shows an improvement in the police's image in the zone; in 1996, 35.2 percent of those polled declared to have never seen police services in their neighborhood, but only 7.5 percent claimed this a year later.

These positive results justified the expansion of the project in Hatillo to other communities. (Chinchilla and Rico 1997)

A massive community policing program has been undertaken in the Brazilian state of **São Paulo**, creating nearly 650 public safety councils (CONSEGs) coordinated by the military police (who are responsible for all patrol and preventive police work, and are under the state governor's authority, except during states of emergency). According to observers, the CONSEGs vary significantly from one area to another, and are most responsive to the better organized and generally wealthier communities. Reportedly, the most successful council is in the downtown area of São Paulo where the business community is actively engaged as they seek to increase commerce. In response to their concerns, the local captain started removing squatters from unoccupied buildings and lots in the area.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, it is precisely the marginalized and poor communities that have the greatest need for improved security. After decades of being the objects of repressive policing, these communities may well respond very positively to a genuine effort to discuss, identify and address their needs. Civil society and human rights organizations can actively foster improved community-police relations. These organizations should be involved in training to encourage dialogue and offer a vision of the challenges the

police will face in the field. They can also play a role in explaining to the public what a police force can and cannot do and specifics on how to make complaints. Finally, these groups can support efforts to improve monitoring and reporting of police abuse and encourage discussions of community-police relations and the role of the police in a democracy.

For the police themselves, the possibility that community policing will increase cooperation should be a significant incentive. If police do not receive information from the public, not only can they not address those individual crimes, they cannot develop remotely accurate data, analysis or cartography of crime issues by city, region or nationally. Basic crime data is indispensable for designing public security policies and assigning resources to maximize effectiveness, rather than simply responding to the loudest outcry about crime or most powerful political sector.

### **4.3 Community policing and accountability in Latin America**

“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) If community policing programs are initiated without any desire to change the way that public order and security problems are defined, there is a serious risk that police in Latin America will exploit the increased community contact for social control and intelligence ends. Certain practices which have parallels with community policing -- community patrols for example -- have already been adopted in a number of Latin American contexts, frequently as elements of counter-insurgency campaigns.

Because of the histories of abuse and corruption at the local as well as national level, community policing approaches must be weighed against the possibility that they will reinforce the dominance of local *caudillos* or actually facilitate police corruption. In Mexico City, for example, new anti-corruption measures being proposed include the rotation of patrol responsibilities so that police do not develop a regular beat that facilitates their ability to “shake-down” local businesses and individuals. This contrasts strongly with the community policing proposition that police should have a regular local beat in order to be more accountable to the community. The weakness of control mechanisms and legal recourse for abuse and corruption in Latin America is a central issue in considering which aspects of community policing may be usefully transferred. Police reform advocates in Latin America could also consider pressing for the creation of some form of civilian review as an integral element of community policing, just as some civil rights activists in the United States have done.

If police themselves are committing crimes on a regular basis as part of their normal practice, police and political authorities must confront this problem first, not look to community policing as a means to increase accountability. Holding police responsible will also be a graphic demonstration of political commitment to reform and should encourage communities to overcome their skepticism and engage with police in community policing programs. Given the history of policing in Latin America, there is a tremendous legacy of popular mistrust and reluctance to engage that must be overcome if serious community policing is to be developed. Efforts to end police impunity will meet with strong resistance from police and their supporters.

But a successful community policing effort that does win community trust and engagement may offer a valuable check on police abuse and corruption through increasing the level of transparency of police actions and policies and creating new channels for communication between the community and police.

In **El Salvador** in the early 1990s, police and community leaders joined in an effort to “re-take” a community that was so crime-ridden that police could not enter it. First, the police did a major sweep of the neighborhood and re-established the police station. The police then requested that community leaders set up committees and “befriend” the police station. Community representatives responded that they would like to work with police but not with the current commanding officer who had a number of problems with the community. That officer was removed and replaced with another officer more amenable to the local people.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4.4 The weakness of social services**

The problem-oriented policing model may be particularly problematic in a Latin American context as it requires other state services and institutions to cooperate in problem solving. In this model, police work with the community to identify problems that affect local security and bring those issues to the attention of the relevant service agency, for example requesting that public works authorities repair or improve lighting, providing services to children and young people, or bringing housing authorities into communities to board up or demolish derelict housing. If these services are weak, competitive, or lack any history of cooperation, the potential of problem-oriented policing will also suffer.

Nonetheless, it is worth considering whether the approach of problem-oriented policing could be of use in efforts to increase community participation in identifying local causes of crime and setting crime-fighting priorities for particular communities. Even where social services are weak, such information could be useful in targeting what limited provision of services there is by the state and other service-oriented organizations, such as churches, in the community. As crime presents one of the greatest challenges to governments throughout Latin America, it is possible that aspects of community policing may offer basic information that could help to prioritize and target social spending to have an impact on crime and security in addition to its specific sectoral goals. Particularly as many countries in Latin America decentralize, local authorities may also find it useful to seek a police-community partnership that can provide additional direction for municipal policies and services. The real potential of problem-oriented policing will obviously have to be adapted to each circumstance. Nonetheless, the fact that social services are weak does not make it impossible for the police to work more closely with a community to address local safety issues in a creative fashion.

### **5. Some Conclusions and Questions**

In Latin America, community policing appears to offer a useful tool for thinking about institutional reform of public security, yet clearly many aspects of community policing as implemented in the United States cannot be transferred easily or in the short-term, and certain approaches raise concerns about the potential for abuse. In each national, regional or local context, Latin Americans must consider whether all or some elements of community policing can be useful and whether the police must first undertake other preliminary reforms in terms of improving police accountability and profesionalization before they are capable of undertaking community policing approaches.

Two of the largest police reform efforts undertaken recently in the area, in El Salvador and Haiti, did not incorporate community policing during the early phases of the reform process. In both of these cases, in which almost entirely new police forces were created, governmental and police authorities and international donors were overwhelmed by the difficulties of recruiting, training and deploying police, negotiating political battles, and confronting such mundane but important details as procuring sufficient uniforms, handcuffs, typewriters and paper. The core challenge of changing and democratizing the nature of police-community relations can easily get lost in the effort to get basic patrols and investigative functions up and running. Yet in both countries, civil society organizations and some international donors are considering the potential benefits of community policing as they strive to deepen and consolidate the reform process and make very under-resourced police forces more effective in their fight against crime.

In **Haiti**, preliminary efforts, including visits to schools and market places by police, have been very well-received by most Haitians, although a project in one city to develop community policing officers assigned to regular beats was dismantled during a force-wide redeployment. Analyses of the development of the new police have noted an alarming tendency toward arrogance by the new agents who are reluctant to descend from their cars and interact with the population. In response, recommendations encourage the Haitian National Police to use community models to foster community-police dialogue and cooperation before this relationship deteriorates further. (WOLA, HRW, and NCHR 1997)

There are useful elements of community policing that can be undertaken despite the many problems presented by many Latin American contexts. Simply placing police stations in more accessible locales, patrolling poor neighborhoods on a regular basis, providing information about crime, and discussing crime issues and police policies with community members and elected authorities would be revolutionary in many Latin American contexts and could make a useful contribution to improving discussions and the development of public security policies. It is possible that relatively minor changes may produce far greater impact in a Latin American context than they would in the United States or Europe. To date, experiences are too few to provide many insights and, as one expert points out:

Community policing means too many things to different people. Its practices are so varied that any evaluation will be partial or challengeable as not being authentic “community policing.” Furthermore, because the mix of practices is so great, any evaluation will be *sui generis*, making the generalization to other situations problematic. (Bayley, cited in Zhao 1996)

It is worth noting that despite their failure to incorporate community policing in the first stages of police reform in El Salvador and Haiti, policy-makers in both countries are now actively considering these approaches. A new community policing pilot project is being launched in the South of Haiti and will receive international assistance, and in El Salvador both civil society groups and police authorities are interested in the potential of community policing. In both these cases, policy-makers and analysts are coming to the conclusion that reforms to civilianize and professionalize the police in those countries require further consolidation to develop a new style of public relations and discussion of public security policies that will support and sustain democratic values, while also seeking to improve police effectiveness in combating

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crime.

## ENDNOTES

1. Many of the issues raised in this section reflect discussions at the March 2 - 4, 1998, seminar "*Jornadas sobre Relaciones Policía-Comunidad*," sponsored by FESPAD and WOLA, held in San Salvador. The speakers at that event were: Kenneth Fortier, former chief of police of Riverside, California; José María Rico, author of numerous books on community policing and public security; and Cristian Riego, professor at the Universidad Diego Portales, Santiago, Chile who had just spent a year studying these issues with Herman Goldstein, author of "Community-Oriented Policing" at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.
2. I have drawn also on information gathered during a week-long delegation organized by WOLA for 10 representatives of civil society organizations from Central America and Mexico. The delegation spent an afternoon touring the Baltimore Police Department and a day in a seminar specially organized by the Police Executive Leadership Program (PELP) of Johns Hopkins University in conjunction with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Community Policing Institute. I am most grateful for their insights and assistance.
3. Kenneth Fortier, in presentation during "*Jornadas sobre Relaciones Policía-Comunidad*." See endnote 1.
4. Interview with Rubem Cesar Fernandes and Elizabeth Sussekinde of Viva Rio. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, July 21, 1998.
5. Some analysts say only 50 percent of crimes are denounced in the United States. (Chambliss 1994)
6. Interviews with police leaders and oversight organizations. São Paulo, Brazil, July 16 and 17, 1998.
7. Interviews by WOLA researcher in El Salvador.



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tel (202) 797-2171 ■ fax (202) 797-2172  
wola@wola.org ■ <http://www.wola.org>

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1630 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20009  
Tel: 202/797-2171  
Fax: 202/797-2172  
wola@wola.org

Primera Calle 2-30  
Colonia Bran  
Ciudad de Guatemala  
Guatemala, Zona 3  
Tel/Fax: 502/232-5603  
wola@guate.net

Calle Siboney, #109  
Colonia Miramonte  
San Salvador, El Salvador  
Tel/Fax: 503/260-1058

<http://www.wola.org>

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