Clara Buitrago (Bielefeld University)

New Strategies on Public Security in Latin America.
Community Policing as Organizational Myth

Abstract

This paper analyzes the police reforms based on community policing strategies implemented in the cities of Bogota and Sao Paulo. As in other parts of the world, in Latin America, this new strategy was perceived as the appropriate solution for the many and serious problems affecting police forces in the region. Following the theoretical contributions of sociological neo-institutionalism, the paper proposes that institutional environments are key elements in the determination of the police reform. The hypothesis is that in Bogotá y Sao Paulo, community-policing strategies were the result of the incorporation of organizational myths. In both case, the implementation of such strategies do not produce holist and truly police reforms, but the implementation of community-policing strategies only increase the external legitimacy of police forces and ensure their resources, stability and prospects for survival in the future.

Keywords: Bogotá, community policing strategies, external legitimacy, organizational myths, São Paulo.

Clara Buitrago
New Strategies on Public Security
Page 27

fiar.

FIAR Vol. 8 No. 1 (June 2015) 27-39
© Forum for Inter-American Research
ISSN: 1867-1519

This paper aims to analyze the police reforms based on community policing strategies implemented by Latin American governments. Community policing could be defined by its focus on the resolution of specific security conflicts that affect a small group of neighbors and by its interest in the establishment of close relations with the community. This model emerged in the United States in the 1970s as a response to a growing perception of inefficiency, corruption and bureaucratization of the police apparatus, although it was not until the 1990s that the US Federal Government implemented this model. After the experience in the United States, other practices of community policing were implemented in Canada, the United Kingdom, Spain, and in several countries of Northern Europe among others. In Latin America, this new strategy was perceived as the appropriate solution for the many and serious problems affecting police forces in the region.

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the consideration that institutional environments are key elements in the determination of police reforms. This approach is more interested in the external legitimacy than in internal efficiency. For this reason, this paper examines the strategies of community policing that have been implemented in the cities of Bogotá, Colombia and São Paulo, Brazil following the theoretical contributions of the sociological neo-institutionalism, especially those outlined by Meyer and Rowan (1991) in their article "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony."

At the end of the 1990s, the police forces of Bogotá and São Paulo experienced a tremendous crisis as citizens had lost confidence in them. At that moment, in both cities a reform based on community policing strategies was implemented. The hypothesis is that community policing experiences in these cities were not holist and truly reforms, but mere formal ones, ensuring the legitimacy, resources and generated expectations of change that guaranteed the future of these police forces.

The Community Policing: Conceptualization and Results

Community policing emerged in the United States as a new approach to fight against criminal activities and at the same time sought to redefine the relationship between the police and the citizens. Instead of playing a passive role, the idea is that citizens work alongside the police forces to improve public security in the community. Community policing can be understood as a set of measures that seek to increase crime prevention activities, achieve more reciprocity in relations between the police and the community, and foster the decentralization of police services (Skolnick/Bayley: 1988).

Theoretically, many benefits derive from the implementation of community policing strategies. They include the strengthening of the capacity of communities to resist and prevent crime; the creation of a more harmonious relationship between the police and the public, including power-sharing in the establishment of the political and tactical priorities of the police; the restructuring of the provision of police services by linking them with other municipal services; and the creation of more extensive and complex roles for police agents.

However, the question that arises is whether all these desired effects were experienced in reality after community policing strategies had been implemented by police organizations. The literature on community policing has shown that, although its implementation has led to a decrease in the fear of crime and a better assessment of the police services it could not been directly related to a decrease of criminality (Skogan: 1994).

Therefore, as it is not warranted that community policing reduces the occurrence of crimes, we may wonder why community policing has spread so successfully throughout many countries around the world. The answer should perhaps be sought outside of police organizations and we need to focus our attention on the general institutional environment in which the police are embedded. Perhaps the key to understanding community policing resides in how and to what extent such strategies increase the legitimacy of police forces and ensure their resources, stability and prospects for survival in the future.

Theoretical Framework

Following the theoretical contributions of sociological neo-institutionalism, especially those outlined by Meyer and Rowan (1991) in their article "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony," this paper proposes that community policing strategies emerged from the incorporation of organizational myths from the business world to the organization of the police forces.

In the past 30 years, the state apparatus has undergone profound changes such as the reduction of resources, the privatization of public enterprises, the decentralization of functions to local or regional governments, and the establishment of the accountability mechanisms of public agencies with respect to the efficiency of their actions. These changes put pressure on police forces to be more creative and flexible (Zhao, 1996).

Thus, issues such as the promotion of active community participation in the "production" of security, the need for inter-agency coordination in the field of public security, the improvement of

(internal or/and external) control mechanisms over policing, and the offer of a quality service for customers could be seen as a direct response to the pressures that the external environment has been exerting on police organizations. More than a technical match between resources and products that operates within an organization, community policing could be understood as an organizational adaptation to rules and social rituals from the business world that are present in the social world.

The hypothesis my research follows the notion that community policing experiences are a mere formal reform that, through the incorporation of certain "organizational myths," produces a sort of appearance of change that ensures legitimacy, resources and expectations for police forces without the need to alter their effective operating structures.

Three assumptions are implicit in this hypothesis:

1. The legitimacy of community policing strategies is derived from following ceremonially organizational myths that are present in the environment such as the participation of the client in policy implementation, the promotion of more horizontal, active and reflective organizational structures, and the promotion of accountability. When a police corps implements this model of community policing, it formally adopts these worldwide accepted rationalizing principles and/or organizational forms called policing "good practices."

2. In order to gain legitimacy, the incorporation of purely formal elements is enough, i.e., unspecified community policing plans are designed; community policing units are created but granted with scarce human and financial resources, etc.

3. The organizations seek to generate a "credible change." In order to place checks on this change, organizations try to avoid systematic evaluation, promoting instead ceremonial evaluation.

This article briefly presents two case studies and then examines whether these cases meet the hypothesis.

Community Policing in Bogotá and São Paulo

Bogotá: Experiences of community policing in Colombia

In the early 1990s, the Colombian police was confronted with a lot of criticism. During these years, the percentage of people claiming to have confidence in the police did not exceed the 35% margin

Clara Buitrago
New Strategies on Public Security
Page 30

FIAR Vol. 8 No. 1 (June 2015) 27-39
© Forum for Inter-American Research
ISSN: 1867-1519

(Centro Nacional de Consultoria). According to Llorente, the police was being accused of a severe lack of efficiency and transparency in its activities, and increased militarization involving its work against organized crime. Indicators of criminality in the major urban centers of the country were rising, and there was evidence of the involvement of police officers in crimes such as robberies, kidnappings, and "social cleansing," i.e. the selective assassination of criminals, prostitutes and beggars in different cities (Camacho/Guzmán; Amnesty International, 1994, qtd. by Llorente 69).

The year 1993 marked a turning point in the recent history of the police corps, when a young girl was raped and murdered in a police station in Bogotá. After this occurrence, confidence in police forces among Colombians declined to 20% and, as a consequence, the National Government promoted a vast reform attempt between 1993 and 1994, which ended with the dismissal of six thousand agents, and the creation of a new police cadre (Ruiz 131). In addition, an office in charge of monitoring the disciplinary system and handling complaints against the police was created (Llorente 70). However, none of these initiatives succeeded and confidence in the police force continued on the wane.

In 1995, the Bogotá Metropolitan Police began working on the implementation of the community policing model. This second reform focused on the internal control of the police and included all the fundamental factors for the successful development of the model: police initiative, local government involvement and public support (Frühling 294).

Implementation

The type of scheme adopted by Bogotá for the development of the community policing initiative amounted to a specific program within the organization rather than the implementation of a "new" police model. Three lines formed this plan of action for community policing in Bogotá: prevention, deterrence, and attention to the community (Llorente 73).

For the implementation of the model, the Metropolitan Police Directorate carried out a strict screening process that led to the selection of 1,064 officers. To be eligible, officials should have a clean service record as well as adequate skills, inclination to community work, and, finally, a recommendation by his/her direct superior (Frühling 2007). The police officers trained in the "community way" were distributed to several police stations. In each of them, an average of 23 community patrols were in place—each of these patrols had two policemen who patrolled 42 blocks.

Clara Buitrago
New Strategies on Public Security
Page 31

FIAR Vol. 8 No. 1 (June 2015) 27-39
© Forum for Inter-American Research
ISSN: 1867-1519

Financial investment into this scheme was, according to data provided by the Community Police Directorate, almost 2 million US dollars for the period from 1998 to 1999. This amounts to 5.7% of the total investments on Bogotá's police during the same period (Llorente 74).

Results of the experience

According to Llorente (97), the impact of the community policing program in Bogotá has only been evaluated in terms of recognition and acceptance generated in the sectors where it has been implemented. According to those parameters, the results have been satisfactory, showing that the implementation of community policing has indeed influenced the attitudes of the population towards the police. However, in other aspects, such as the sense of security of the inhabitants of Bogotá and the prevention of crime, the impact of the program seems less clear.

São Paulo: Experiences of Community Policing in Brazil

Like many Latin American countries, Brazil has several police forces. The Federal Constitution of 1988 maintains the strict division of responsibilities between the military and the civilian police forces. The military police is responsible for patrolling and the keeping of public order. Civilian police is in charge of criminal investigations. Each of these police forces has separate command, control and communications systems.

Between 1980 and 1990, the State of São Paulo, like the rest of Brazil, experienced a strong rise in crime. According to De Mesquita Neto (2004, 111), the number of deaths by homicide or intentional injuries increased from 3,452 in 1980 to 12,350 in 1996. As such the homicide rate reached a ratio of 36.2 per 100,000 habitants.

Faced with this situation, the police showed serious deficiencies and suffered from growing problems linked to its lack of legitimacy, effectiveness and efficiency. For example, violence performed by the police itself reached a peak in 1992, when government forces killed 1,458 civilians (1,451 of them were killed by military police and 7 by the civil police). That year, 111 prisoners were killed during a police operation to crush a riot in Carandiru penitentiary in the city of São Paulo. In 1997, although levels of violence subside considerably, members of the police still killed 466 civilians (435 by military police and 31 by the civil one). In addition, in the period from 1996 to 2000, the ombudsman received 18,248 complaints against police officers, including the practice of torture, extortion, and participation in drug trafficking.

Clara Buitrago
New Strategies on Public Security
Page 32

fiar.

FIAR Vol. 8 No. 1 (June 2015) 27-39
© Forum for Inter-American Research
ISSN: 1867-1519

The citizen's lack of confidence in the police was on the rise. A survey carried out in 1997 by *Data Folha* in the city of São Paulo showed that 74% of the population had more fear of than confidence in the police (compared with just 51% in 1995). The same survey showed that 73% of the population felt that the police used more violence than necessary (compared with 44% in 1995) and 36% felt that the police was inefficient (compared to 22% in 1995) (qtd. in De Mesquita Neto 2008, 262).

In response to pressures for reform, the Governor of the State of São Paulo presented a proposal for an amendment to the Federal Constitution of 1988 to shift the responsibility of patrolling the streets from the military police to the civil police, assigning the latter the task of maintaining public order. This proposal was openly rejected by the commanders of the military police in several states and was not passed because its implementation severely weakened the military police (De Mesquita Neto 2004, 115).

Although the proposed reform did not succeed, it served to reveal the conflict between police, government and society. In this context, the new commander-in-chief of the military police proposed the adoption of community policing as a new philosophy and a new strategy for the police corps, and set up a commission with representatives of military police, civilian police, government agencies, non-governmental organizations and community groups in order to promote planning and implementing of the new strategy.

Implementation

Inspired by the experience of the United States, Canada, Japan and England, the community policing of the State of São Paulo was implemented as a model for police performance focussing on three objectives: 1) to transform the military police into an organization open to consultation and collaboration with the community; 2) to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the police service, respecting the rights of citizens and the rule of law; and 3) to improve public security by reducing crime levels, disorder, and insecurity.

According to the data cited by De Mesquita Neto (2004, 120), from December 1997 to July 2001, the military police put the model of community policing into practice in 199 of 386 local police units in the State: 67 in São Paulo, 23 in other cities in the Metropolitan Region and 109 in the interior of São Paulo State. In addition, the military police established 202 mobile community policing bases: 87 in São Paulo, 51 in other cities in the Metropolitan Region and 64 in the interior of the State. In 2001, the number of police officers working in community policing bases reached 7,305 officers

(approximately 8.3% of the total number of military police officers): 1,956 officers in São Paulo, 944 officers in other cities in the Metropolitan Region and 4,405 officers in the interior of the state.

Although the community police was presented as a new philosophy and organization strategy by the military police, this organization actually invested a very limited volume of financial and human resources in its execution. According to the data provided by Mesquita Neto in 2004, between 1998 and 2001 the military police of State of São Paulo had no officers responsible for planning and implementing community policing and also lacked the financial means to do so, as the Department's community police had a budget of just 5 million US dollars.

Results of the Experience

De Mesquita Neto refers to two levels of evaluation to determine of the effects of community policing. The first is based on four indicators: the number of civilian deaths at the hands of police officers, the number of police officers killed in service, the number of complaints received by the ombudsman, and the way in which the population perceives the service. The second level is structured around specific areas where community policing has been established. Based on this data, the author concludes that community policing has not served to improve the performance of the military police. Although the implementation of community policing has shown an improvement in the attitude of the citizens with regard to the police force, this has happened only in certain areas, and, thus, it can be concluded that the effect was very limited.

Analysis of the Cases

The Search for Legitimacy: Implementation of the Community Police in Bogotá and São Paulo Police

The first assumption of the hypothesis on which this research is based claims that the legitimacy of community policing strategies derives from the following of ceremonially organizational myths present in the environment. When a police corps implements this model of community policing, it formally adopts certain rationalizing principles and/or organizational forms described as the "good practices" of policing, which are accepted worldwide. Thus, the police forces find an explanation for their activities and guarantee resources and legitimacy. Next, I will apply this argument to the cases of community police in Bogotá and São Paulo.

In the two cases there was a confidence crisis in the police that led to the implementation of the reform. Prior to the implementation of community policing, the civilian governments of both

Clara Buitrago
New Strategies on Public Security
Page 34

FIAR Vol. 8 No. 1 (June 2015) 27-39
© Forum for Inter-American Research
ISSN: 1867-1519

countries tried to implement reforms in order to reduce military influence and to create an office to monitor the police disciplinary system. These reforms were openly rejected by the police commanders and failed.

What is striking in these two experiences is that once the attempts to reform from the outside had been rejected, the commanders of both police forces were the ones who implemented the strategy of community policing. It seems quite clear that in a situation of uncertainty caused by the conflict between the police, the government and society, police commanders needed to increase their legitimacy. Thus, these two organizations reacted to external pressures for reform by starting an auto-reform based on those strategies that at the time were highly valued in the organizational environment of international police forces: the community policing strategies.

The implementation of the community policing initiatives in Bogotá and São Paulo did not arise, then, as a comprehensive reform that would affect and transform the traditional daily activities of these police forces, but it was instead a strategy of legitimation enacted by the police corps through the formal implementation of work units based on community policing. The implementation of policing models that were in vogue in the United States, Canada and Europe allowed the police commanders to show a willingness to change, offering them the possibility of legitimizing their organizations, as these models apparently represented a solution to the confidence crisis based on a set of rationalized criteria tested in other parts of the world. Both human rights activists and academic experts, which were the groups that exerted most pressure on the police, knew about community policing strategies and also how prestigious this practice was at the international level.

Community Policing: A Mere Formal Reform

As it was previously noted, the hypothesis claims that in order to ensure legitimacy it is enough to incorporate the ceremonial or formal organizational myths and/or good practices related to these myths. In this section, I will explain why community policing can be understood as a purely formal element within the Bogotá and São Paulo's police forces.

It is possible to establish a set of indicators in order to check the extent to which the strategies of community policing have impregnated the effective functioning of Bogotá and São Paulo's police corps. I propose the following indicators: the number of troops assigned to police community services, the population included in the community police units and the economic resources attached to community policing.

In the case of Bogotá, where community policing has been a specific program within the police organization, the program had around 900 officers, according to official data. This means that only 6% of the police personnel were assigned to the community policing (Llorente 79). With regard to the population they serve, there is a rate of 0.31 community police officer per 1,000 inhabitants in the areas where the service operates. This figure contrasts significantly with the overall rate of 1.65 police officers per 1,000 Bogotá inhabitants when all professional staff is included and 0.94 per 1,000 when only the patrolling officials are taken into account. Therefore, the police community/inhabitants ratio is very low (Llorente 80). In terms of economic resources, the community policing budget in Bogotá represents 5.7 percent of the total investments made in the same period in the police (Llorente 74).

In the case of São Paulo, where the community policing program was presented as a philosophy of transformation, there are 7,305 police officers working in community police bases. That amounts to approximately 8.3% of the total number of military police officers. With respect to the population to police, although official sources do not provide information about the rate of community policemen per inhabitant, taking into account that in 2001 the population of the State of São Paulo was around 35,500,000 inhabitants, we can get an idea: 2,900 police officers are charged with patrolling the metropolitan area, where more than 17,000,000 inhabitants were living. And 4,405 police officers were in charge of the interior of the State, where the remaining 18,000,000 inhabitants were living.

Taking into consideration the limited volume of financial and human resources that the community policing forces of Bogotá and São Paulo had, it could be inferred that this model has had very scarce possibilities to affect the day-to-day operations of their police forces. It can be argued, then, that both cases seem to be linked instead to the implementation of mere formal structures.

Semblance of Change and Evaluation

The last assumption of the hypothesis guiding this research claims that organizations, in order to promote an "image of change", try to avoid a systematic evaluation of their performance, promoting instead a kind of inspection and ceremonial evaluation.

In the case of Bogotá, the available studies on the impact of community policing focused on subjective aspects such as the recognition and acceptance of the program, rather than on systematic and objective indicators of the actions of community policing. While there are few studies relating to the activities developed by the community police of Bogotá, such as the details

Clara Buitrago
New Strategies on Public Security
Page 36

FIAR Vol. 8 No. 1 (June 2015) 27-39
© Forum for Inter-American Research
ISSN: 1867-1519

on the size of the population attended, the areas of work, the implementation strategies, we can find several studies on the personal qualities of police officers and their ability to build relationships with residents. For example, the study conducted by Campo and Luque (1999), based on surveys carried out in the areas covered by the community policing agents, showed that the program was recognized by more than 80% of the population of the areas where it was implemented and that more than 85% of the people interviewed who knew the service rated it as good and claimed that community policemen are not only officials worried about the safety of their neighborhoods and their social problems, but also have outstanding skills in communicating and working with the community. Instead of a systematic and objective evaluation, these studies make a ceremonial assessments based on perceptions about the community police officers.

Unlike the Bogotá case, São Paulo's community policing has been evaluated systematically, using both objective and subjective indicators. Studies based on objective indicators, such as the number of civilian killed by police officers or the number of complaints received by the ombudsman, showed that the implementation of community policing had not served to improve the actions of military police, leading instead to even more police violence and complaints.

However, subjective indicators on community policing showed results similar to the Bogotá case. Surveys conducted by *Data Folha* (qtd. in De Mesquita Neto 2008, 262) indicated that the percentage of the population showing fear in the police, which had increased from 51% in 1995 to 74% in 1997, fell to 66% in 1999. In addition, the percentage of the population that perceived that the police used excessive force, which had increased from 44% in 1995 to 73% in 1997, was reduced to just 49% in 1999. Moreover, in the areas in which the service was implemented, community policing has enjoyed widespread acceptance.

Conclusions

This work has sought to demonstrate how the police reform based on the strategies of community policing has affected the Bogotá Metropolitan Police and the São Paulo Military Police. Following the framework of sociological neo-institutionalism, this paper has claimed that community policing can be understood as a reform that seeks to achieve the external legitimization of the police corps through the incorporation of organizational myths.

At the end of the 1990s, the police in Bogotá and São Paulo, two corps profoundly distrusted by citizens, found in community policing a way to model new police reforms. By incorporating good

Clara Buitrago
New Strategies on Public Security
Page 37

FIAR Vol. 8 No. 1 (June 2015) 27-39
© Forum for Inter-American Research
ISSN: 1867-1519

practices present in the international institutional environment, Bogotá and São Paulo's police forces managed to generate legitimacy and acceptance.

Thus, the community police of Bogotá and São Paulo are a successful case of external legitimization through the incorporation of organizational myths. Through attaching to the task of community policing a small share of their total personnel and operating with scant coordination with other police services, these police forces have achieved a high level of acceptance and, at least in the perception of the citizenry in general, these strategies have managed to be seen as effective alternatives to reduce crime and improve coexistence.

Clara Buitrago
New Strategies on Public Security
Page 38

FIAR Vol. 8 No. 1 (June 2015) 27-39
© Forum for Inter-American Research
ISSN: 1867-1519

Works Cited

Camacho, Alvaro, and Alvaro Guzmán. *Colombia: ciudad y violencia.* Bogotá: Ediciones Foro Nacional, 1990. Print.

Centro Nacional de Consultoría. "La gran encuesta del año." Revista *Semana*. 8 de enero. Bogotá, 1991. Print.

De Mesquita Neto, Paulo. *Ensayos sobre seguridad ciudadana*. Quito, Ecuador: Quito Alcaldía Metropolitana, 2008. Print.

———. "La policía comunitaria en São Paulo: problemas de implementación y consolidación." Ed. Hugo Frühling. *Calles más seguras. Estudios de policía comunitaria en América Latina.* New York: Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, 2004. 109-138. Print.

Frühling, Hugo. "Dos décadas de reforma policial en América Latina: factores para su éxito o fracaso." Ed. Erik Alda y Gustavo Beliz.*¿Cuál es la salida? : la agenda inconclusa de la seguridad ciudadana.* New York: Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, 2007. 281-310. Print.

Llorente, María Victoría. "La experiencia de Bogotá: contexto y balance." Ed. Hugo Frühling. *Calles más seguras. Estudios de policía comunitaria en América Latina.* New York: Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, 2004. 65-108. Print.

Meyer, John and Brian Rowan. "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony." Ed. Walter Powell and Paul DiMaggio. *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis.* Chicago: UCP, 1991. 22-32. Print.

Ruiz, Juan Carlos. "La encrucijada de la seguridad ciudadana en América Latina: Entre la tentación autoritaria y participación comunitaria." Ed. Diego Cardona, Bernard Labatut, Stéphanie Lavaux, and Ruben Sánchez. *Encrucijadas de la seguridad en Europa y las Américas.* Bogotá: Universidad del Rosario, 2004. 123-146. Print.

Skogan, Wesley. "The Impact of Community Policing on Neighborhood Residents: A Cross-Site Analysis." Ed. Denis Rosenbaum. *The Challenge of Community Policing: Testing the Promises.* California: Sage Publications, 1994. 167-181. Print.

Skolnick, Jerome and David Bayley. "Theme and Variation in Community Policing." Ed. Michael Tonry and Norval Morris. *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research,* Vol. 10. Chicago: UCP, 1988. Web. 8 Feb 2014.

Zhao, Jihong. *Why Police Organizations Change: A Study of Community-Oriented Policing*. Washington, D.C.: Police Executive Research Forum, 1996. Print.

Clara Buitrago
New Strategies on Public Security
Page 39

f i a r.

FIAR Vol. 8 No. 1 (June 2015) 27-39
© Forum for Inter-American Research
ISSN: 1867-1519