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From Venezuela

Police-Public Interaction: Activation, Response, and Interpersonal and Situational Variables

Situational and personal variables, such as appearance, dress, and attitude of suspects and crime reporters, have a direct effect on police response.

By Luis Gerardo Gabaldon and Mario Murua

Introduction

Social control attempts to contain censured behaviors within acceptable limits. In societies of increasing urbanization and constant social change, such as in Venezuela, informal police actions of control resulting from lack of established policy become formal social control procedures.

Starting from the premise that police use a system of selection in cases they process—both upon detection and upon further inquiry—and that personal and situational variables determine police responses, this research involved direct observation of a police force in a medium-sized Venezuelan city.

The study, conducted by the Center of Criminal and Penal Investigations, was the first one on the routine operations of the police in Venezuela. The results of this study are of interest to the police force, as well as to concerned organizations outside the force who posed this

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question: What actions in what circumstances generate what types of responses from the Venezuelan police?

Police and the penal system

In Venezuela formal social control is centered on the penal justice system, an organization of functionally separate divisions referred to as a system. The Venezuelan system is comprised of the police, an armed force to maintain public order and to conduct criminal investigations; the penal courts; the public prosecutors; and the division of penal incarceration, under the Ministry of Justice.

The police system has four main branches: the Judicial Technical Police, in charge of civil investigations; Intelligence and Prevention, a military-style organization responsible for civil cases that threaten the State; the National Guard, initially a civilian police force now attached to the armed forces and dealing increasingly with narcotics cases; and the Uniformed Police, once the only decentralized, individual State-governed unit, now becoming more centrally controlled.

The first three branches are considered instructional units able to independently dispatch penal proceedings. The fourth branch is an auxiliary of the Judicial

Technical Police; it is empowered only to carry out preliminary investigations, seal off crime sites, and ensure that all persons and objects involved in the crime are accounted for.

Organization of the police headquarters

The police headquarters in this study is responsible for a capital city of 150,000 inhabitants and eight surrounding districts.

The commander is not a police officer and is thus subject to removal. He is responsible for more than 350 individuals of the following ranks: inspectors (1.5 percent); alternate officers (4 percent); sub officers (3 percent); noncommissioned officers (13 percent); and agents (80 percent). The department consists of an operations division and an intelligence division.

Operations reports to an inspector and is responsible for vigilance planning and motorized patrol distribution. The uniformed patrols work in three 8-hour shifts in identified vehicles, usually in pairs; they cover an assigned area and transport individuals as needed. Operations also maintains police statistical records and provides monthly reports to the Ministry of Interior Relations. In addition, the

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department is responsible for personnel instruction.

Intelligence reports to a police official, and its main responsibilities are to verify police reports, prosecute investigations, maintain daily control of prisoners, and conduct special investigations. Approximately 25 of its members are plainclothes officers. Most carry more advanced weapons than operations officers. They are divided into two specialized groups: the special brigade, of approximately 50 riot control officers; and the bank brigade, of approximately 35 specialists in bank protection.

Police interventions

Criminal investigation and instruction in Venezuela is the responsibility of the Judicial Technical Police, although police vigilance and maintenance of public order is the function of the Uniformed Police; this study was restricted to the Uniformed Police.

The first step in examining a police action is to analyze suspected criminal activity, as well as the usual police response to such activity. This reveals what problems the police perceive and what methods they use in particular cases. This study attempted to answer the following questions:

- What types of situations are most likely to come to police attention?
- In what timeframes are these situations most likely to come to police attention?
- How do these activities come to police attention?
- What approaches do police officers use, especially immediately upon notification, and how are these approaches adapted to the situation?
- What types of persons are involved in these activities?

Researchers collected data from an initial field test and organized the information as follows:

- Type of criminal report—acts against persons, acts against property, acts of public disorder, acts of a sexual nature, drug-related acts, and others, such as traffic, documents, and multiple acts.

- Setting of criminal report—ghetto area, central city, suburb, rural area.
- Time of criminal report—12 midnight to 6 a.m., 6 a.m. to 12 noon, 12 noon to 6 p.m., or 6 p.m. to 12 midnight.
- Place of criminal report—headquarters or onsite.
- Source of criminal report—police order, direct observance, referral by civilian.
- Type of civilians involved—victims or crime reporter and suspects.

Investigators also studied standard police responses, which ranged in the degree of coercion and deprivation applied. Researchers also indicated the interest in a particular situation of the person reporting the act, as well as the characteristics of the suspect. Standard police responses were categorized as follows:

- Consultation with a superior.
- Written record.
- Complaint filed.
- Identification requested.
- Formal search.
- Further inquiry required.
- Formal warning issued.
- Formal arrest.
- Use of weapon.
- Other.

Police response to situation variables

The study also attempted to determine if police response was affected by the characteristics of the person reporting the crime or by those of the crime suspect. In the case of persons reporting crimes, researchers considered appearance (well-dressed versus not well-dressed) and demanding or assertive versus deferential or timid characteristics. For suspects, researchers considered appearance (well-dressed or not), language characteristics (use of slang), and attitude (expressions of resistance, resignation, or cooperation).

Data were also collected on the reactions to the police officers' initial responses to suspects as well as to persons reporting the crime. People reporting crimes classified police responses as attentive or

inattentive and courteous or discourteous. Suspects classified police action on the basis of whether an explanation was offered by police and whether violence was used.

Finally, data were collected on the number and rank of officers and on witnesses present at the initial investigation to determine if these factors affected the police-public interaction.

Field methodology

Prior to the fieldwork, headquarters superiors were informed of the study and held discussions on its methodology and purpose. The selected variables were pre-tested, the observers introduced to the fieldwork, and various time schedules were tested in the months of August and September 1983 during the week and on weekends.

The field pretest revealed the following:

- Headquarters and the motorized patrol handled 80 percent of the crime.
- The majority of crime reports were referred to headquarters.
- 35 percent of crimes were committed between 12 noon and 6 p.m., 34 percent between 12 midnight and 6 a.m.
- 61 percent of crimes were committed on the weekend; 39 percent during the week.

Final data were collected from October 1983 to February 1984 for a total of 28 days. Data were collected during the week and on the weekends during the peak times of 12 noon to 6 p.m. and 12 midnight to 6 a.m. at headquarters and with the motorized patrol. Results indicated that the motorized patrol handled most suspects, while headquarters handled most of the persons reporting crimes. A total of 672 hours of observation were collected; only 432 hours were used for this study. The final analysis involved 198 actual observations.

Intervention measures observed

Of the total observations, 44 percent were reported by headquarters, and 56 percent were reported by the motorized patrol.

Of the total, 11 percent were requests for investigations, 56 percent were directly detected, and 33 percent were complaints by individuals (only one was by telephone). Of all cases, 75 percent had victims; 18 percent had witnesses present and 7 percent involved witness referrals. In 87 cases, only 17 percent involved more than two victims; 83 percent involved one victim. Of the 198 cases, 111 involved known suspects.

Most crimes (76 percent) were committed from Friday through Sunday; 26 percent were committed from Monday through Thursday, which confirms the results of the pretest. Concerning location, 48 percent of crimes occurred in the center city and immediately surrounding area; 26 percent in ghetto areas; 16 percent in the suburbs; and 3 percent in the rural areas. Sixty-four percent of the crimes were committed between 12 midnight and 6 a.m., and 23 percent were committed from 6 p.m. to 12 midnight.

The following general observations were reported:

- 17 percent were acts committed against persons.
- 51 percent involved minor injuries; 36 percent, threats; 13 percent, wounds.
- 22 percent of the acts were against property.
- 52.4 percent were robberies with violence; 21.4 percent were nonviolent; 21.4 percent involved damages; and 4.8 percent, fraud.
- 22 percent were acts of public disorder.
- 51 percent involved drunkenness; 32 percent, scandalous conduct; 7 percent, resisting arrest.
- 1 percent involved nonviolent sexual crime.
- 4 percent involved narcotics.
- 30 percent were in the "other" category (traffic violations, documentation).
- 4 percent were "multiples" involving more than one of the above.

Approximately 40 percent occurred on Saturday, between 12 midnight to 6 a.m.; 44 percent of these were against persons, and 83 percent were narcotics related. Most crimes occurred in the center city: 56 percent were against persons, 42 per-

cent against property, 68 percent were for public disorder, 38 percent for other, and 50 percent for multiple crimes. Narcotics crimes were highest in the suburbs (43 percent) and in ghetto areas (29 percent).

These results do not evince the occurrence of crime in an area as much as they do crime detection by the local police. In fact, the study revealed that 59 percent of all crimes against persons and 63 percent of crimes against property were reported to the police by individuals, whereas 59 percent of public disorder crimes, 86 percent of narcotics crimes, 80 percent of "other" crimes, and 63 percent of multiple crimes were observed directly by the police. Followup investigations by police were less successful in confirming crimes against persons—only 9 percent of these resulted in a report—and crimes against property, only 5 percent of which resulted in a report, than in investigations of complaints of public disorder, 25 percent of which resulted in a report and narcotics, 14 percent of which resulted in a report.

Police most often responded with arrests, identification requests, formal warnings, and searches. Nevertheless, the formal complaint demonstrates the most police interest in a case. In 20 to 40 minutes, all pertinent data were recorded under oath for the formal complaints. Although the formal complaint was found most often in crimes against persons or property, it was only observed in one-third of the cases under study; it was not a primary method used by the Uniformed Police in this study.

Public disorder and the category of "other" criminal acts provoked similar police responses: identification, warning, search, and arrest. More than one-half of the warnings observed in the study were used in cases of public disorder. Intimidation, rather than an actual need for fire power, explains the high police usage of weapons in the "other" category.

In general, these results indicate a distinction in police response between clearly criminal acts, such as crimes against persons, property, narcotics, and multiples, and crimes that are ambiguous or without individual blame. The results also indicate the following observations about police responses: proactive police responses were the norm toward observable criminal acts that did not involve a

specific victim, such as public disorder; reactive police responses were the norm in cases of specific victim involvement, especially in crimes against persons or property; and the police tended to confront routine criminal acts on the spot with varying intensity, to assert authority in threatening situations, and not to initiate additional proceedings.

Police response as determined by characteristics of crime reporters and suspects

As mentioned earlier, police response is not only determined by characteristics of the people and the situation at hand but also by the characteristics and reactions of the suspect.

The study found a positive relationship between crime reporters' appearance and assertiveness and the response of filing a formal complaint. Furthermore, officers tended to give more attention to report details and were more patient with well-dressed crime reporters. Police also tended to be more polite toward the well-dressed reporter. Thus, the supposition was confirmed that personal variables, such as appearance and attitude, have a direct effect on police response.

Suspects were studied by appearance (well-dressed or not), language (standard versus jargon), and resistance to police (cooperative or not). The only notable difference in appearance was that well-dressed suspects tended to receive more warnings; less well-dressed suspects seemed to be arrested more. If a warning is considered a favorable alternative to arrest, then appearance seems to have a positive effect on overall police response.

The use of jargon by the suspect appears to have a negative effect on police response, especially with regard to the search response. Occasional or frequent jargon users were searched more often than nonusers. The study also found a slight increase in arrests for even occasional users of jargon.

Concerning suspect cooperation, study results indicated that extreme cooperation as well as extreme resistance elicited a police request for identification, whereas normal cooperation or response did not;

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in such cases an officer may feel threatened and uses his authority to calm his own uncertainty. Police conducted more searches of resistant suspects than of cooperative ones. But the clearest difference was in the arrest and warning responses, in which resistant suspects received more of both than cooperative suspects.

The study also analyzed how police approach a suspect: with explanation or without explanation. When establishing contact with an unknown but well-dressed suspect, the police offered an explanation in 52 percent of the cases; the police offered explanations to less well-dressed suspects in only 17 percent of the cases. Suspects of varied dress were approached without explanation three times as often as were other suspects.

Concerning police violence, the study showed that police tended to be more violent almost three times as often when approaching a less well-dressed suspect than a well-dressed suspect. Suspects who used jargon and expressed resistance to police produced similar responses.

These results confirm the initial supposition that statistical, dynamic variables associated with a crime suspect or crime reporter have a subjective effect on the police officer's response to the situation and the persons involved.

Unknown situational variables in police response

Three additional variables were studied for their effects on police-public interaction: the number and rank of police officers present, the presence of witnesses, and suspect behavior after the initial police response.

The preliminary assumption regarding number and rank of officers present was

that the greater number and higher rank of officers present would induce greater attention and courtesy toward crime reporters and less violence toward suspects. Study results showed no difference in reporter treatment, but differences were found in suspect treatment.

Regardless of rank, when two or more officers were present, suspects were approached without explanation rather than with explanation. Police violence appeared to increase in the absence of high-ranking officials, but only when two or more officers were present. The study suggested that such violence is due more to the strength-in-numbers-against-adversity hypothesis than to the actual absence of high-ranking officers.

Researchers initially assumed that a greater number of witnesses present would result in calmer and more controlled police officers as well as suspects. In reality, the presence or number of witnesses appeared to have little effect either on the use of explanations or on police violence.

Finally, suspect behavior toward police was categorized as acceptance, resignation, or confrontation. Potential negative response modification of the police to suspect behavior was also evaluated. Results demonstrated that police modified their responses in 38.7 percent of cases involving suspects who were confrontational, as opposed to those who demonstrated acceptance (2.5 percent). These results corroborate initial suppositions that police response is not exclusively related to the objective definition of the intervention situation.

Conclusions

In brief, the results of this study indicate that the Uniformed Police exhibited a tendency to establish an immediate police

presence, even before the criminality of the situation was determined. Formal complaints appeared to be used more as archives of possible suspects for better police control than as preparatory documents for criminal prosecution. Arrest seemed to be more of an assertion of police authority and confirmation of subjective behavior rather than a means of clarifying the facts for later testimony.

The study also indicated that a suspect's initial attitude can cause police officers to modify their response toward that suspect. The most assertive and best-dressed complainants elicited the best police response, while collaborative and well-dressed suspects were better treated than those who were poorly dressed or resisted authority. Furthermore, the greater the number of police personnel that intervened in a situation, the greater the probability that violence was used against a suspect.

This study illustrates the complexity of a criminal situation and the importance of discretion to define and solve it. The timeframe limitations of the study along with its restriction to one branch of the police force will permit only marginal use of the results for the formal system of penal justice. But perhaps the use of these results for study in other contexts can help to form a more complete hypothesis. Through initial observations of criminal activity and the processing of justice, the objective of a description and analysis of the formal control system in Venezuela may be possible.

The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and Office for Victims of Crime.