

The effect of policing and public security on government performance

Policing and public security interventions have no effect on the perception of government performance.

Geographic region: South Asia, Latin America and Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa

Effect size: No effect ($g=-0.004$)

Confidence in study findings: Low (5 studies with 21 effect sizes)

Short summary

Policing and public security interventions aim to improve governance through strategies like integrated policing, increased security deployment, and community policing. Overall, the evidence base shows no effect, but there is some variation. In Liberia, "Confidence Patrols" improved security but did not enhance trust in the government. Community policing across six countries failed to improve perceptions of state legitimacy. In Afghanistan, increased police presence during elections reduced voter turnout without curbing violence. However, integrated policing in Iraq reduced fears of repression and improved perceptions of fairness among minorities, highlighting its potential to strengthen government legitimacy in divided societies. Context and implementation were mediators to success. Overall, the cell has low confidence due to inconsistency in study findings.

Long summary

The intervention

Policing and public security interventions aim to improve governance by fostering trust, improving service delivery, and addressing community grievances. These strategies include integrating diverse officers into police units, increasing security deployment, and community policing. In Iraq, integrated policing aimed to reduce ethnic tensions by diversifying police units, while Afghanistan focused on securing polling centers through heightened police presence during elections. Liberia's "Confidence Patrols" deployed retrained officers to rural communities, enhancing security over 14 months.

How the intervention is expected to affect this outcome

Policing reforms are intended to enhance perceptions of government legitimacy by signaling fairness, promoting inclusivity, and strengthening state presence. Community policing, for example, focuses on collaboration with citizens, while integrated policing addresses historical grievances in divided societies by reducing fears of state repression. However, interventions may face challenges like uneven implementation or backlash from traditional power structures.

The evidence base

This cell includes five impact evaluations, presenting heterogeneous results on the effects of policing and public security interventions on government performance.

Three primary studies were included: one involving six field experiments conducted in Brazil, Colombia, Liberia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Uganda; another employing a survey experiment in Baghdad, Iraq; a third conducted in Liberia; and finally an RCT conducted in Papua New Guinea. One secondary research study was about Afghanistan.

Evidence findings

The evidence reveals heterogeneous effects of policing interventions on government performance. In Liberia, but with overall no effect, "Confidence Patrols" did not enhance trust in the police, courts, or government, with backlash from traditional power structures like secret societies undermining state efforts. Community policing across six countries failed to improve perceptions of police intentions, capacity, or state legitimacy due to uneven implementation and limited buy-in from leadership. In Afghanistan, increased police deployment during elections decreased voter turnout by 30%, driven by negative perceptions of security forces. However, integrated policing in Iraq reduced the minorities' fears of repression by the police and government.

Included studies

Blair et al. (2019) analysed the "Confidence Patrols" program in Liberia. This involved deploying teams of newly retrained, better-equipped police officers on recurring patrols to rural communities across three counties: Bong, Lofa, and Nimba. This initiative aimed to increase citizens' knowledge of the police and Liberian law, enhance security of property rights, and reduce crime, particularly in areas governed by customary authorities like chiefs and secret societies. The program was part of a broader effort to decentralize security and justice provision in rural Liberia, especially as the UN peacekeepers withdrew. The study employed a randomized controlled trial design, focusing on 74 communities with at least 500 residents, near usable roads, and with limited prior exposure to the program. These communities were grouped into nine geographic blocks, with four communities in each block randomly assigned to treatment and the rest to control. The evaluation began in June 2014 and continued until September 2015, with most treatment communities visited four or five times over 14 months. Findings suggest that the program did not improve citizens' perceptions of the police, courts, or government. There was also some evidence of backlash from the customary sector, with increased reports of the "bush devil" appearing in treatment communities (a controversial ceremonial figure that secret societies use to maintain social order, often at the expense of non-members; Isser et al., 2009). The study is rated low confidence because of the lack of information on attrition rate and unclear evaluation questions.

Blair et al. (2021) analysed community policing as a reform strategy aimed at building trust between citizens and police by increasing engagement through foot patrols, community meetings, and problem-oriented policing strategies. The study involved six field experiments conducted in Brazil, Colombia, Liberia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Uganda. Researchers collaborated with local police agencies to implement community policing practices tailored to each context. The interventions reached approximately 9 million people across 516 treated areas. The study design included random assignment of areas to either community policing practices or a control group, with data collected from 18,382 citizens and 874 police officers. Findings show that there were no significant improvements in citizens' perceptions of police intentions or capacity. There was also no significant improvement in how citizens perceive the police or how police perceive citizens. Finally, there was no significant improvements in perceived state legitimacy, with some variability in Liberia and Uganda. The study is considered to have low confidence due to the absence of detailed information on the attrition rate. While the study involved a large sample size, with surveys conducted on 18,382 citizens and 874 police officers, there is no explicit mention of attrition rates in the document.

Condra et al. (2019) examine the effect of security provisions in Afghanistan where the government deployed varying levels of Afghan National Police to polling centers to safeguard against insurgent violence. This intervention aimed to secure the election process and enhance public trust in the government amidst a backdrop of significant pre-election violence and concerns about insurgent attacks. The study utilized a quasi-experimental design, leveraging the unintentional variation in police deployment across polling centers with similar histories of violence. This allowed the researchers to isolate the effects of police presence on voter turnout. Data sources included internal government records, event-level violence data, certified voter turnout numbers, and pre- and post-election survey data from potential voters. Overall results suggest that the level of police deployment and historical violence did not significantly impact the level of violence during the election period, indicating that other factors not captured by these variables might be influencing the situation. The confidence level is considered medium confidence as it is a non-experimental study. The confidence level is considered medium confidence as it is a non-experimental study.

Cooper (2018) analysed the Community Auxiliary Police (CAP) program in Papua New Guinea aimed at enhancing policing in areas with limited state presence. The program empowers selected community members with police powers, including arrest and investigation, to address local offenses, particularly focusing on gender-based violence. These officers are unarmed and operate within their own communities, providing a bridge between the state and remote villages. The study employs a randomized controlled trial design, conducted in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville. It involves 39 villages and a sample size of 1,950 households and 45 candidates. The randomization was implemented through a lottery system at the Council of Elders level, resulting in cluster-level assignments for households and individual-level assignments for candidates. The study also includes a historical analysis using panel data from villages with CAP officers. There is no significant evidence that experience with community policing affects trust in government, propensity to vote with the chief, or knowledge of government. The study is rated medium due to its partial description of the evaluation questions.

Nanes (2019) examines the impact of police integration on support for anti-government violence in Iraq, a country marked by sectarian conflict. The intervention involves integrating police forces by including officers from various ethnic and religious groups in mixed units, rather than segregating them into homogeneous units. This integration aims to address the commitment problem between the powerful state and weaker minority groups by making future repression more costly for the state and signaling a commitment to fair treatment. The research employs a survey experiment conducted among 800 residents of Baghdad, Iraq. Respondents were randomly assigned to receive either a treatment or control vignette, with the treatment group being informed about police integration. The study uses a list experiment to measure support for anti-government violence and expectations of repression. The sample includes both Sunni and Shia Arabs, with efforts made to ensure a representative sample of Baghdad's diverse neighborhood. Findings of the study suggest that perceptions of police integration are associated with lower expected repression by both the police and the government, particularly among Sunnis. The study is rated medium confidence as it is a non-experimental study.

Confidence assessment

Overall low: While this cell has 5 impact evaluation studies, the findings across the studies are inconsistent.

Other outcomes in this study:

Violence and atrocity prevention / nature and scale of violence and atrocities

Community and state governance / presence and quality of social safety nets

Human security / political security

Social cohesion / feelings of trust and acceptance of diversity

Human security / physical security