The Weaknesses of Public Security Forces in Mexico City

Elena Azaola¹

This report discusses the results of a qualitative study conducted during 2001–2005, involving the preventive police in Mexico City. A key goal of this study was to ascertain police officers' views and their understanding of their job as well as the obstacles they face when doing their work. The study also looked at what the officers maintain they need to accomplish their jobs. The study involved approximately 200 officers. The study concluded that there is deep and widespread job dissatisfaction among the police. The study also found that deplorable working conditions have generated a sense of abandonment or lack of protection among police officers, leading to their growing loss of interest in fulfilling their duties properly. Another important problem the study underscored is what the rank and file describes as a continual lack of citizen respect and recognition.

Key Words: Police dissatisfaction • preventive police • police working conditions • public trust • citizen respect • recognition

This paper outlines some of the results of a qualitative study the author conducted between 2001 and 2005 of the preventive police in Mexico City. One of the key goals of this study was to give voice to police officers so as to understand their views and their understanding of their job as well as the obstacles they face when doing their work. The study is based on the following premises: police officers must know about and be willing to carry out any police reform project if it is to produce deep changes (see Bayley, 2001); if reform is to have the backing of the police, it must take their needs into account and respond to their problems; and to know and understand the problems that are most important for police officers, it is necessary to listen to their point of view.

The study consists of the analysis of the testimony of 280 police officers in all ranks of the hierarchy. The author obtained 170 testimonies in interviews conducted at police headquarters and obtained 110 testimonies from eight-page autobiographies written by police officers of different ranks and career lengths in response to an invitation from their institution to write the story of their life as a policeman.

Elena Azaola is Senior Investigator at the Center for Advanced Studies and Research in Social Anthropology in Mexico City. Once an advisor on the National Commission on Human Rights (1991–1993), she is a current Council Member on the Commission of Human Rights of Mexico City. Most of Dr. Azaola’s research is in the field of juvenile and women’s justice institutions, human rights, and violence.

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For the interviews, police officers were told that the interviewer had consent from the authorities and the interviews were strictly for academic purposes and could not have any effect on their work situation or their professional development as police officers. The author interviewed officers both in groups and individually. The group interviews lasted for about two and a half hours and were conducted with groups of eight to ten police officers of the same rank, covering the 10 ranks that integrate that hierarchical structure. The interviews were in a discussion format, and most of the officers contributed to the discussions. The officers did not receive any guidelines as to what kinds of information to include. The interviews were recorded on tape. The autobiographies were written freely and voluntarily by police officers who accepted the call to tell their experiences for a contest held by the Secretariat of Public Security.

The preventive police force in Mexico City (population 9 million) is made up of 76,000 officers, half of whom are considered employees of the Secretariat of Public Security (Secretaría de Seguridad Pública, SSP); the other half (auxiliary and bank police) have an irregular status, so although they are members of the force, their labor rights are not fully recognized, and they operate autonomously and according to arbitrary and not very transparent criteria (Arroyo, 2003; Varenik, 2005). Of the total, including auxiliary forces, 20% are traffic police (policía de vialidad). Belonging to the traffic police is considered a privilege, even though not all officers have access to a patrol car or a motorcycle, because these officers have the greatest opportunity to extort those who have violated the traffic code, and the income they receive from extortion far outstrips their wage (Pérez, 2004).

The preventive police force is not only the most numerous in Mexico City but also in the rest of the Mexican Republic; as Table 1 shows, it encompasses 91% of the state force at the national level. The different preventive police forces all have the commitment to preserve public order, to take care of the demands of citizens, to protect citizens' lives and goods, and to control motor traffic, while judicial or ministerial police and the Federal Agency of Investigations take care of crime investigation. Nevertheless, preventive police can detain and present those who commit a crime and are caught in flagrante to the authorities.

Main Findings

It is a known fact that there is widespread dissatisfaction with police performance among the inhabitants of Mexico City (see, among others, Zepeda, 2004; López Portillo, 2003; Arango, 2004). It is perhaps a less known fact that there is also deep and widespread job dissatisfaction among the police. High levels of uncertainty prevail, as
norms are not consistently applied in the contractual relationship between the Public Security Secretariat and the police. There is also widespread vertical (inter-rank) and horizontal (inter pares) lack of trust within the institution, which constitutes a significant obstacle to the adequate performance of police work. Because norms and procedures are not applied consistently, a parallel informal or paralegal regime governs relations within the force. Deplorable working conditions have also generated a sense of abandonment or lack of protection among police officers, leading to their growing loss of interest in fulfilling their duties properly. Another important problem is what the rank and file describes as a continual lack of citizen respect and recognition.

Some recurring issues emerge in both the interviews and the autobiographies. First among them are the problems related to deficient working conditions. Second, there is the problem of corruption and the way the police address the issue. Other issues that come up frequently are relations with police chiefs, a negative self-image and the image citizens have of the police, problems related to lack of training, the way officers feel they are treated by the institution, and alcohol and drug consumption among officers. The following section uses a small sample of the collected testimonies to examine these issues.3

**Deficient Working Conditions**

A set of issues police officers often refer to relates to deficient working conditions. This matter has a broad consensus—nuances and differences exist depending on rank, seniority, or the sector or grouping to which officers belong. The problems relate to wages, material conditions, working hours, and promotions.

**Wages**

There is great dissatisfaction with wages among the rank and file. It is commonplace to hear officers of all ranks say that low wages promote and even justify corruption. They also say that poor police performance is related to low wage levels.

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**Table 1. National State Force, 2006**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Police Force</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Preventive</td>
<td>190,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Preventive</td>
<td>144,276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judicial or Ministerial</td>
<td>25,495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Preventive</td>
<td>19,597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Investigation Agents</td>
<td>5,945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>386,043</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Source: Secretaría de Seguridad Pública Federal, January, 2007*
This job is not valued in our society. In any other country, a policeman is well paid, but a policeman is not well paid here and so he can’t do his job properly.

To improve [the situation of] corruption, they would have to pay us a good salary. They pay us three thousand pesos per fortnight, minus the deductions. . . . This is not enough for the family . . . if we have no stimulus, well, we look for another way to get ahead . . . if we got a decent wage, we would do our work more carefully and we would not risk things for the 100 or 200 pesos that drivers give us. . . .

Strange as this may seem, some police officers have gone so far as to suggest that if it is not possible to pay them a better wage, their employer should help them to find another job.

I think that a policeman should be helped, or the corporation itself should help him, to find an extra job, to improve his living standard . . . I would like to be called into the office someday and told that they would find us another vocation other than this one of being a policeman, so that there would be more opportunities for the people who have a real service vocation.

If I were the head of the police, I would reduce the number of effective police officers in order to improve training and raise wages. I would take good care of my police officers and would recognize their achievements publicly.

The rank and file express dissatisfaction not just because of the poor wages they receive but also because rules and procedures that would make their jobs more secure are not applied consistently, because there is a lack of recognition for their work, because there are no other incentives and benefits, and because of the many promises they receive that are never fulfilled. Thus, one of the major causes of discouragement is that they do not know what they can count on.

The main problem is resignation among most of the elements and a great disillusionment because they feel deceived for so many promises that for whatever reason are never fulfilled . . . Clear rules are needed for this to work properly . . . rules that chain up the corrupt one who wants to be a chief and will not allow him to be one. Recognition of
higher ranking colleagues is very important when good work is done. We are greatly lacking in self-esteem, to the point of sometimes thinking about suicide because of the feeling that no one cares about us as human beings. We need people to listen to us and to take an interest in what is happening to us. . . .

The great majority of the elements fulfill their work more out of obligation than conviction. Our job lacks something: motivation and acknowledgment.

As these testimonies show, the problem is not just that policemen get paid very little for their work but also that their efforts are not valued or appreciated and they are not able to express their points of view. This is why they insist repeatedly on the need for their superiors to listen to them and to take their opinions into account. Indeed, they often describe situations in which far from gaining recognition for undertaking important work, they were further discouraged by inadequate responses.  

Equipment and Uniforms
Police officers are almost unanimous in their discontent with lack of equipment and with their uniforms, which are either inadequate or of very bad quality.

We the police lack equipment—we don’t have it because of the corruption at the higher levels. They have not given us uniforms for two years. . . . Our flack-jackets are not part of our uniform and we have to buy them ourselves, the quality of the uniforms is very bad, and we are not given good equipment.

Because we are a special group, we suffer from many unmet needs. We have to buy our own torches [flashlights], batteries, everything we need to go into an alley. We are aware that we have to buy something but we do not have enough means to buy uniforms only to have them stolen.

The top administrative ranks have not given us uniforms or credentials for over ten years. The majority of delinquents carry better weapons than we do. We even have to pay for bullets—they charge us 10 pesos, and most of the times we shoot into the air just to scare people.
Regarding equipment, the problem is not just that the officers are not given the minimum equipment necessary to do their job properly but also—as the testimonies show—that equipment is distributed discretionally or stolen, or that police officers are forced to pay for it, be it access to a weapon, a motorbike, or a patrol car. And they are also charged if they want to work in certain (less dangerous and more profitable) areas. According to the testimonials, the officers are also charged for bullets, flashlights, batteries, and also for the repair of patrol cars, and, as is shown below, they prefer to pay for it themselves rather than limit their source of “income.” It is notable that the issue of the uniform is more relevant than that of equipment, or is at least more frequently mentioned. This is because the uniform is not only an important personal presentation element for officers, but it is also a part of what constitutes the identity of the police. Indeed, the identity of the police seems to be intertwined with or represented by the uniform, which explains why, when they are given a bad quality uniform, they feel offended or scorned.

*I want to go on serving with this uniform, that is my life and thus honor the name of the Secretariat . . . I'm not thinking of turning in this uniform, I am not ashamed of being a policeman. . . . I love this uniform and wouldn't change it for anything in the world. . . .*

**Working Hours**
The working day is a cause of complaint predominantly among the higher (superintendent) and mid-level ranks (officers and inspectors), as these testimonies show:

*We get no family or social life, no working hours. . . . We have not had a holiday for more than 15 years. Many of us are single because we destroy any chance of having a family. . . . We do not get to see our children grow up. Sometimes we see what we gain, but we don’t see what we lose: family and health.*

*We get up at 4 o'clock in the morning and at 22:30 we get home, annoyed, exhausted, tired, angry . . . everything on the street is a noisy confusion . . . we only want to get home so that we can begin to get comfortable. The family sees us from 11 o'clock at night until 4 in the morning. . . . We cannot enjoy our family.*

*Chiefs and sub-chiefs should do shifts and work only 8 hour days, and not work for the long hours that we do because it feels horrible to fall asleep when we get into the patrol car. . . .*
Weaknesses of Public Security Forces in Mexico City

We never get holidays, never. In 7 or 8 years we have not missed one day [of work]. Having a post in the structure means we cannot miss work, get ill, nothing. If we get ill, we get fired.

We are always at work at 5:30 in the morning until 11 at night. So the people who run the Secretariat are tired, exhausted. A mid-level officer is not allowed to go on holiday or take sick leave. This is an attack on the family, not only on oneself, and this has an effect on the discontent of commanding officers.

Although working hours appear to be a greater source of discontent among the upper ranks, for many reasons working hours should concern police officers with no leadership positions also. The main reason is probably that the area where they live is not taken into account when assigning them to a sector or group, which often means that the journey to and from work prolongs their working day by up to three or four hours. Indeed, policemen are not allowed to request reassignment for this reason. Other reasons why the working day might be prolonged is when police officers are punished with 8 to 36 hours of arrest, which usually happens for banal misdemeanors (such as not wearing their helmet, for instance) or because of arbitrary decisions by their bosses. Even when interviewees say that the time and the conditions of arrests have improved, they still claim that conditions far from comply with clearly established rules and procedures. Indeed, almost every police officer says that he or she has been subjected to unjustified arrest.

Another issue many interviewees addressed is the bad quality of the food they are given at police barracks or that they get when they are on the street, as well as the difficulties they face when trying to satisfy their most elementary needs while at work. Many policemen said their bosses were indifferent to or insensitive about their basic necessities, and the same was true of citizens who make fun of them or censure them for eating in the public space to the point that they feel their humanity is ignored.

If you are a policeman, it is as though you were not a human being: you can’t go to the bathroom or eat; citizens don’t like it when they see you eating some tacos. When they see us eating, people shout at us, asking if that is what they are paying their taxes for . . .

There are no proper facilities at the barracks, good toilets, a dining room, a library. . . . There would be no need for a policeman to go out and get [money] to have lunch if there was a good dining room with even just some coffee and bread. A human being with a nice bellyful
would go out to work happily. . . . If they want better security, they have to improve the barracks, the toilets, dining facilities, otherwise in what conditions do we leave the barracks to go out on the street?

There is something that is very fundamental: people have to realize that we police are human beings, not robots. We cannot work like robots. . . . Society does not trouble to think that we also think and feel like they do, that we are not made of steel and that we are not supermen either. . . .

I would ask for more psychological support because sometimes we need to know that we matter to somebody.

The image of the robot, the machine of steel, or the superman emerges when they refer to their condition and their human needs, which clearly shows how they feel ill treated.

Promotions

Another main cause of discontent is lack of respect for procedures and norms that regulate careers and promotions. There is a broad consensus about this within the rank and file (not among the top ranks). The testimonies include frequent references to disappointment because promotions are not made even when the requirements stipulated in the regulations have been met. There are also references to the innumerable arbitrary decisions that ignore the requirements and lead to the practice of giving jobs to family members, friends, or people who are recommended, without recognition of the efforts made by officers who have served for years without ever being promoted (see Gaceta Oficial del Departamento del Distrito Federal, 1994).

There have been no courses for promotion in ten years. I was promoted twice during the first eight years, but over the last ten years I have not been able to rise up the ranks. . . . There are so many obstacles in our way, and when you do not find the right way, you lose heart. When you prepare for something and you don’t succeed, you get frustrated. . . . What has happened to all those promises?

There are people that prepare themselves and rise up the ranks, but there are others that ascend just because they are someone’s relative. Everyone wants a motorbike or a patrol car, but only chosen relatives get a look in. There are no places other than for the mounted police or in the grenadiers (granaderos).
### Table 2. Views of Working Conditions Among Police Officers by Rank

<table>
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<th>Rank</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| **Top Ranks**       | *I have been on the job for 45 years and I earn a good wage, I cannot complain. Things have gone well for me, so what I have I owe to the police. I have not paid for my rise up the ranks; I have earned it with my work. The regular policeman works [an] 8 or 12 hour shift, but we who have a post in the structure have no personal life, and because of my age and seniority I hold on to this. I do my job carefully because it is the only thing that sustains me. If I retire, they give me a pauper’s wage of 5 thousand pesos, and I lose my rank. And do you know what this has cost us? Our life. . . .*  

*It is harder to be a boss now because the elements talk to you as an equal (se te ponen al tú por tú). Arrests used to last 8 to 15 days, but not anymore, there was more discipline before. They did not know as much before, and now they read the regulations and know that arrests can only last 36 hours. They have lawyers advising them. We should not let them be advised like this.*  

*The street is a jungle; you have to cross yourself to go out. It is not our judgment but that of our bosses that counts on the street, or we risk being arrested. For them everything is wrong, if they find us eating or if we go to the toilet, you have to ask permission for everything. They don’t care what we eat or if we drink, they don’t care about what time we go home, so what rights has a policeman got? Only a few of us enjoy this job. We do it because we need to, because as we say, where shall we go at our age? I prefer to risk dying here, to go to jail or to be kicked out, than to be [ . . . ] unemployed.*  

*One feels bad because there is no work security, if a new superior comes along one gets fired, or one loses one’s position. Effort is not rewarded.*  

*I took exams to get promoted and they even gave a rank to those who failed, and those of us who passed were told there were not enough posts. They tell me the same thing at every examination session. It would be better if they told me how much I have to pay for a rank rather than making me go round in circles. I’ve been in service for 22 years and have taken the exams several times; they always say the same thing—there are no open posts. They demoralize you and even lower your wages. They should be fair and not have preferences, because they promote their friends and their secretaries. It is traumatizing to be in service for so many years and always remain a lowly policeman. We are not given the chance to ascend honestly. We have been here for so many years and I have not even been thanked. We don’t even get the medals we used to receive every five years. Now they just give us 2 additional pesos for every five years and 34 pesos for meals for the family.*  

| Source: Interviews by Elena Azaola and Esperanza Reyes, Secretariat of Public Security. |
Various testimonies pointed in the same direction: loss of motivation due to repeated attempts to make rules work that are never applied; lack of trust and uncertainty that generate a sense of insecurity when rules exist but are not obeyed; and, finally, a sense of apathy and paralysis these situations cause. Table 2 compares opinions about working conditions according to rank.

**Corruption**

This section looks at the different explanations that policemen offer for corruption and at some of the corrupt practices they engage in. It also offers an overall view of the issue and raises some questions about it. First, there is the simplest explanation that corruption occurs as a result of low wages paid to the rank and file.

_Policemen are corrupt because what they get paid is not enough._

_If they paid us a good wage, corruption would be solved. What happens right now is that with the infractions we are paying ourselves for the salary that we are not given._

By contrast, others think that people become policemen because they intend to obtain income through corruption:

_The uniform is used to get rich: 95% of the policemen come in with the idea that they will get rich._

For others, the problem is the lack of institutional support they receive at the onset of their professional careers, which becomes a decisive factor in the corruption of police officers. Some policemen mention the moment they started the basic training course given at the police academy as the time when they began to have close contact with corruption.

. . . _the teachers and instructors themselves were part of the much hated corruption because some teachers with no ethics would sell exams and ranks, and some instructors, for a certain amount of money, would let people off when they were arrested._

_We went to the shooting range three times, but as we were not given bullets, the teacher would tell us that if we wanted to shoot we would have to pay him to buy them. . . . This is when I realized that it is in the academy that the spirit of corruption of the policeman is formed._
Yet others stated that corruption began when they were assigned to a specific sector or group:

You get to the sector and the bosses begin to ask you for money. They force the policeman to get money off people. There are policemen who say that if they go out with 5 pesos, they have to come back with 1,000; that's what they say.

As soon as you set foot in the sector, you get asked for money for everything: the uniform, notebook, not to get sent here or there or not to have to do this or that job, and most of all for a patrol car . . . . As soon as you get in, it's a begging spree (pedidera). I give the money, if I have it, because you get a benefit . . . . There is consent at all levels.

It is hard to add anything else to the above testimonies. In any case, it is important to emphasize the common element among them: the ease with which people admit their own and others' participation in corruption; the absence of a framework in which legality is the frame of reference; and the acceptance of a parallel order or paralegal regime that in fact governs the institution. Equally, the lack of questioning corruption and the sense that one is confronted with something inevitable is striking. Some women police officers said that they also participate in corruption:

There is more corruption among the men than among us women, which is why they say that the police are corrupt. We also take what we can, we don't ask for money but if we are offered it, we accept it. What happens is that we are not offered it as openly and unashamedly because some of us get offended and kick up a fuss, but others don't.

Cases of corruption are also mentioned by those who have held administrative posts:

There are lots of irregularities, for example, according to a staff list I had 1,200 policemen in my charge, but in reality there were only 200; the others were assigned to politicians and I didn't even know them nor have their files. The DF [Federal District, which covers the Mexico City metropolitan area] government itself would give them leave and would send them out with journalists, former presidents; a crime of diversion of human resources . . . . Some were seconded for as long as 15 or 20 years and I never knew where they were; but they had a rank and received a wage.
Azaola

Before, there were also journalists and actors who received the rank of police officers and would receive a wage corresponding to their supposed rank. The wives of the chiefs got them as well. So there were actors who were captains, colonels, etc.

The above quotes show how the ties of corruption are woven between institutions through informal agreements that reveal the predominance of a paralegal order. This system operates on a personal and political basis that includes the higher and middle management of the police organization. In other words, on the margins of and above existing laws, a number of policemen have ceased to carry out their public security functions, so they can protect the private security of civil servants and their family members, members of the governing party, friends, or journalists. On the other hand, groups within the institution, such as the patrols on motorcycles or cars, are especially envied since they are considered to be the best sources of “income.” It is therefore said that not just anyone can enter these groups, because posts are reserved for family members or people recommended by the chiefs.

_Patrol car duty brings in quite a lot of money . . . some colleagues repair their patrol cars or buy parts when the cars break down, because if they wait for them to get fixed, they stop earning . . . they prove that it is best to invest their money in the institution than in any other business. . . . In the police, you can invest and gain juicy benefits, although the fault is partly that of the population that does not report on this._

_We get charged 100 pesos for not coming in to work, 500 for getting in the patrol car, and I could go on like this listing the infinite number of acts of corruption that exist within the corporation. . . ._

Some policemen hold their chiefs responsible for corruption. Various testimonies mention the existence of what is known as the Brotherhood (the Hermandad) among the chiefs.

_The top ranks are part of a power group, of the so-called corrupt Hermandad that does not allow trained young policemen to take up leadership posts, since those posts have not only cost them years of service but also money, and they do not think that one should rise up the ranks without paying the price. They own this Secretariat and between them they rotate sectors with the help of a godfather (Jefe Halcón). There have been sector chiefs that have been removed for_
corruption but instead of being punished, they have been put in another sector.

The famous Hermandad has to end, that mafia that does so much damage to the corporation and the only thing it does is rotate posts . . . But never has a chief been fired; that really would be a notable thing.

We all go in wanting to be good policemen, but our aspirations are cut short by some chiefs who, instead of supporting us, send us out to work so that they can demand quotas from us.

All of us who have been career officers get caught up in the game of receiving money [from people] to give to the commander and [in this way] receive privileges . . . it is a chain that reaches up to the top.

The above provides another different and practically opposite reason for corruption: according to these latter testimonies, corruption is not a result of insufficient wages among the rank and file but the result of pressure that the top rank officials put on lower ranking officers to raise for them certain amounts of money. This operation is also portrayed as unchangeable even though most of those interviewed report that, in one way or another, they are victims of such a system. Other testimonies mention that ranks can also be bought, and many are chiefs because they paid for the post they occupy:

There are still personnel whose ranks were given or bought during past administrations.

That is the first link in the chain of that old corruption: everything has a price here.

Here you can ascend through your wallet (bolsillo), buying posts. I have never had that opportunity because I never came across any of the influential ones . . . they would have to be my acquaintances for me to do it.

Another form of corruption is to earn money by protecting criminals:

One of the things that aids corruption is fear, because when we get a criminal, we know who they are and we know they will get out and sometimes even offer us money . . . and since wages are very bad and we do not get promoted, well, sometimes we take it.
Another source of corruption relates to the distribution of benefits. For example, the contribution of the police to build houses [for the officers], which is allocated through a lottery system, is flawed and tilted. Various policemen testified to the fact that their chiefs often win the lotteries:

Here, the police do not get houses, but they say that there are police chiefs with three or four apartments they receive because they have “won lotteries.”

Another corruption problem that officers often mention is the management of the police force savings bank, a problem that has not been resolved despite having been the object of a criminal investigation and prosecution a few years ago.

Another view is that police corruption cannot be explained without taking into account the participation of the citizenry, although in some cases the emphasis on citizen responsibility appears to be an attempt to exonerate the police. In addition, some policemen cover up corruption by saying that they do not extort citizens but rather the latter give them “gifts” to show their gratitude and appreciation for their services.

Corruption is often the fault of citizens who offer us [money] to sort out a problem. Other times it is a gift because they are grateful for our work. . . . So we don’t know if it is right or wrong to accept what citizens give us out of gratitude, which is a gift . . . I don’t think there is anything wrong with it, it’s not as if we extort them.

People think that all police officers are corrupt, but corruption starts with the citizens because it is easier for them to speed up their business and save time with money. The government allows many things, the city is engulfed in corruption, and since we do not get good social benefits because of the economy of the country, the policeman allows himself to be corrupted.

I would like to ask citizens and the mass media: why are they so keen to put the blame on us if there is corruption everywhere in this country? [Even] various government authorities and leaders have stolen money from the Mexicans.

There are others who steal millions and get immunity. But when the policeman steals four pesos, he is persecuted.
The preceding testimonies are worrying because, in addition to referring to gifts as a way to cover up or justify corruption, they appear to suggest the following argument: if politicians can steal, why should the police not? Or, if there is impunity for politicians, why should the police not benefit from it as well? This seems to suggest that police corruption is justified or minimized by the fact that others are also corrupt. There is also a rather widespread view that it is not possible to put a stop to corruption or even to address it with any degree of success:

*Corruption within the police is an evil that cannot be exterminated.* . . .

*At the rank and file level, when a policeman is efficient, corruption should not be seen negatively.*

*People say that if we were paid better wages there would be no more extortion* (mordida). *I don't think so; there would be extortion and the wage.*

Finally, others suggest in their testimonies that corruption is not just a mark of the relationship between police officers and citizens, but it profoundly alters the relationship police officers have among themselves. This is apparent in the following testimonies:

*Discipline has to be imposed, but what breaks the chain of command is corruption, since we cannot look at our chiefs in the same way after we have given them money and after they have accepted it. If I am going to apply corrective measures to someone for not doing their job and if the chief has received money from someone, then he will not be able to apply that corrective [measure] because the subordinate will not respect him anymore, so that is how the chain of command is lost, because of corruption.*

Corruption, then, not only alters or subverts the relationship between police and citizens but also irremediably distorts relations among police officers. The testimonies suggest that most policemen cannot escape corruption. This fact not only exposes them to citizen opprobrium but also breaks down and undermines police self-confidence. If chiefs ask their subordinates to pay dues, and if the latter, in turn, ask citizens to do so; if anyone who has attained a certain rank is suspected of having bought their post; or if every person knows about acts of corruption among their colleagues, and their colleagues, in turn, know about one’s own acts of corruption, then nobody is immune and nobody can trust anyone else or be trusted by anyone else. The inevitability of this situation is perhaps the greatest weakness of the police institution. This being the case,
corruption is probably more damaging to the police than to citizens. In other words, it is clear that policemen cannot escape corruption, which leaves them exposed, makes them vulnerable, and puts them in such a weak position that their capacity to carry out their duty properly is extremely limited. It is as though they are unable to act other than from a position of vulnerability, a state that does not allow them to escape corruption: theirs, that of their chiefs, and that of their peers. A situation like the one just described is clearly unsustainable or places a heavy burden on the functioning of the organization, and so it appears that the only way to counteract vulnerability is to subscribe to a sort of tacit pact that forces policemen to protect themselves and cover up for one another. This pact, however, only serves to establish a precarious equilibrium that is under a constant threat of breakdown. This explains the growing number of policemen who have been reported, are being investigated, or are in prison.

As regards corruption among the citizenry, it seems that the procedures in place to ensure compliance with traffic rules are so ineffective that, as various testimonies point out, everyone finds it advantageous—even if only on the surface and in the short-term—to violate the rules and find a way around them through corruption. In this case, it is necessary to think about how to elaborate procedures that both favor rule obedience and also allow for the reestablishment of bonds of trust between the police and the citizenry.7

Image and Self-Image

One of the issues that has received little attention in the specialized literature is the self-image of the police; however, this issue is relevant when trying to understand the way they view themselves and the way they think others see them, in their language and according to their own categories. It also seems important to see whether there have been changes in the way officers viewed the police before they entered the institution and how they see themselves once they are members of the organization, as well as the way they think citizens view them and how they view citizens from their own vantage point. These “images” are important insofar as they can tell us how policemen feel vis-à-vis everyone else, the perceived constraints on their work that emerge as a result of their image, and the way this affects their performance.

By collecting the views of policemen on these issues, we have attempted to understand how they see themselves and how they think others see them, which is another way of looking at how they relate to others once they have adopted the policemen identity. This work is also an attempt to relate or integrate a subjective dimension (self-perception) and an objective reality (relations with other agents or sectors). As we know, both dimensions are always present and interact with and condition each other.
Self-Image

Most testimonies that follow aim to answer the question of how policemen viewed the police before they entered the institution and how they see it and themselves now:

Just hearing the word ‘police’ would leave a bad taste in my mouth . . . I thought that all these people did was to rob or extort people who had the misfortune of falling into their hands. Six years on the other side has not changed my idea of the police much; there is no end of justifications, some very valid, others less so, but what is for sure is that the police does not work as it should.

Before I entered the organization, the opinion I had was the same as the one many people have today: I thought that being a policeman was the worst thing, that policemen were crooks, extortionists. I was one of those people who would hurl insults when I saw a patrulla detaining a driver. . . . I thought that it was degrading to be a uniformed police officer, that these were people who were not educated enough. I was against the police in every way. When I entered the institution, I was insulted and attacked and even beaten on many occasions by people who think like I used to think.

For normal people or civilians, the police have always been a source of fear, repression, beings from another world, illiterate, drunkards, drug addicts, thieves, etc. Obviously, I could not think differently; when seeing an armed officer, I would imagine being detained so that they could rob me or put me in the police car.

Before I entered the organization, I thought that they were going to treat me badly to train me, that they were going to scorn me for making a mistake or because I had not done well in my training.

The idea I had was that the police lacked academic training, which was apparent in the way they spoke; that they were careless with themselves (dirty); that they were thieves and all the other synonyms that society uses to label us, abusive and even murderous.

Before becoming a member of the institution, I thought that being a policeman was degrading, that it was a job that did not live up to the sacrifice I had made to study for my degree. . . . When I used to see
policemen on the street, they never symbolized security, but rather they inspired my mistrust. However, the need for economic income led me to overcome my prejudices and to ask to be admitted to the mounted regiment.

Initially, I had a deplorable and very negative idea about the police, perhaps because I had never had any dealings with them or maybe because of their reputation for corruption and arrogance, but experiencing the inclemency and arbitrariness faced by a good police officer as myself, I realize how wrong I was.

In my opinion, 80% of policemen are negative and only 20% want to serve society.

The above testimonies provide a good idea of how policemen see themselves and how they think others see them. Some of the characterizations they made are that policemen are thieves, abusive, arrogant, ignorant, dirty, alcoholic, corrupt, rude, addicted to drugs, and aggressive. Although not all testimonies mention these traits, taking the sample as a whole, what comes across is the predominantly very negative view they had of the police before entering the organization. In some cases that image became more positive with membership, when some officers report that their perception changed somewhat. In other cases policemen say that entering the organization did not change the negative image they had previously, but that image was actually corroborated. It is perhaps relevant to ask what kind of relationship can be established with the citizenry on the basis of this self-perception, or how are they able to perform with such low self-image? The following section addresses these questions.

Image Citizens Have of the Police

Having looked at how policemen view themselves and how they think others observe them, this section now looks at how policemen view citizens and what they would like to say about the created image of the police.

Everyone, from the highest politician to the lowliest of citizens, uses the police as their shield to hide the bad things they do. They say we are corrupt when in fact it is the citizen who is corrupt, and the first thing he does is to offer us money to get rid of the problem after infringing a law or a regulation.
Citizens make demands of us, and I feel angry with the citizenry because it complains, for example, that I am a drunkard, but they themselves don’t start by changing things. It is not just the police who is corrupt, but the citizen who is willing to give [us money] as well. Corruption is bred because of necessity. Citizens do not support us; they shout at us, they throw stones at us. . . .

I would like a society that would not stigmatize us for our humble origins. In fact, it is true that we lack a certain economic status, but we do have a strong fighting spirit and enough courage to give our lives for someone who we don’t know.

I am aware and know the problem that surrounds us perfectly, because of the pressure that citizens especially submit us to . . . I think that everyone knows that we the police are not loved or supported by anyone. Everyone calls us thieves, conmen.

As regards the citizenry, my experience, like that of any colleague, is of aggression, as well as insults and the classic threats that they will put me in jail for doing my work, but, even with all this, I have a good view of society since in the end we are there to serve it.

When we try to impose order, we get insulted. They have no idea what it is like to spend eight hours standing at a crossroads. . . . There are crazy people on the street who insult us for no reason. Sometimes you get into arguments with people and even when a citizen attacks us, he is always right. Sometimes you have to shout at people.

We are the scum of the earth for society because they say we are evil and corrupt, and it does not occur to them that we are part of that same society and we are as corrupt as it is. The whole of society has lost its values. . . . It is not worth talking to a society that is more corrupt than we are. . . .

For the police officer, citizens are also arrogant, corrupt, and incapable of respecting the rules. It is as though the police feel they have become scapegoats, so they have to purge the evil that others do. Their anger comes across in many ways. They feel scorned, made to look ridiculous, abused, and some even refer to a desire to get revenge on the citizenry. Others adopt a more resigned attitude as if they had no choice but to tolerate
the citizens’ abuses. Whatever the case is, at least in the abstract, their relationship with the citizenry is apparently characterized, if not by confrontation, at least by fear of being insulted, scorned, and mistreated. It seems as though policemen have to engage in various battles when they go out on the street: on the one hand against crime, accidents, and disorder, and on the other against the mistrust of citizens. Under these conditions policemen are unlikely to offer protection and security given the way citizens regard them.

**Institutional Image**

The following testimonies refer to the way policemen view the institution to which they belong and how they see themselves as members of that institution, as well as how they compare with other police organizations in the world.

*We are at a disadvantage internationally, but only in terms of equipment and installations because in terms of courage, aptitude, of what we call esprit de corps (espiritu policial), we are at the level of any other country, if not in first place.*

*I think that there is no comparison that can be made with international institutions because we are so far below any that one might mention, not because we despise ourselves, but we must know our place and try to overcome [our situation] and improve so that one day we can be counted among the best police forces in the world.*

*The SSP is among the best public security forces in the world, and what we lack is better training to optimize our performance, legal support when we carry out our duties, and to improve the quality of life of police officers with better salaries and benefits.*

*I think that in the police corporations in our country there are great deficiencies, not only economic, to acquire the whole infrastructure that would allow us to be better equipped, trained, to be professionals when combating crime; but also deficiencies related to culture, conscience, commitment, royalty, and honesty.*

The testimonies above contrast with those in the previous sections because they show that while there is recognition of the institutional deficiencies that put the police at a disadvantage in relation to similar institutions in other countries, there is also an undeniable pride in belonging to the institution. This is true to such a degree that many testimonies underline what policemen consider to be their greatest virtues: bravery,
commitment, *esprit de corps*, which in the eyes of some compensates for the mostly material deficiencies and places them on a par with other police forces abroad. However, what prevails and is apparent in the testimonies are the very high levels of tension and the lack of trust between citizens and the police. Statements devaluing or denigrating the police appear constantly in their self-portrayal. What is clear is that whatever means they adopt to confront that reality (including identification with the image that denigrates them, rebelling against it, and considering that such an image is better applied to corrupt citizens, or expressing a hope that police-citizen relations will improve in the future), at present the ability of the police to perform their duty and to provide citizens with security and protection is compromised.

**Conclusions**

This paper has focused mainly on the obstacles that street preventive police officers in Mexico City face in order to fight rising crime effectively. As shown, two of the most important obstacles are the deficiencies and weaknesses of the police organization, which have become more visible lately. These shortcomings were already there, but they seem to get worse as the demands on the institution increase. Regarding the challenges that fighting rising crime poses on democratization, it is clear that the consolidation of democracy and the rule of law requires more solid and better managed organizations, enjoying higher levels of trust and credibility.

The need for better managed police organizations is particularly important if one takes into account the fact that in Mexico the rate of having been exposed to crime is very high compared with other Latin American countries. During 2006, 20.2% of Mexicans reported having been victims of crime—a number lower only than those reported among Peruvians (26.2%), and Chileans (23.1%). It is worth mentioning that the rate of victimization in Mexico in 2006 increased three points over that of 2004 (Parás & Coleman, 2006, p. 73).

It is important to note that in Mexico City there has been no comprehensive police reform process, but although one cannot talk about successful policies to transform the police, compared with the organization of 25 years ago, there have been modest improvements and some slow progress in the right direction. Civilian control over police has been somewhat achieved, but efficient police administration is still lacking.

On the same note, it should be kept in mind that corruption has been identified as a *significant challenge* for the democratization process as it implies a clear deviation from the rule of law (Ambos, 2003; Frühling, 2001; Parás & Coleman 2006). At the same time, it is worth remembering that almost two thirds of the Mexican population (64.9%) surveyed in 2006 said they are *seriously worried* about the effects of delinquency on the
present well-being of citizens as well as their future well-being, and those who have been victims of crime are less inclined to consider that government functionaries should always act according to the law (Parás & Coleman, 2006 pp. 82, 86).

In terms of human rights accountability, it must be said that this issue is only just beginning to emerge on the institutional police agenda, and the organizational changes to implement it have not been carried out. Just over the last decade public institutions began to supervise the compliance with human rights. The police was the focus of many complaints lodged against it and the one that has resisted the most (see Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez, 2005; and Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal 2003, 2004a, 2004b).

Finally, the difficulties of reforming an institution with 76,000 officers should be taken into account. There are significant obstacles to improving working conditions and expanding incentive programs for officers. At the same time, constant changes at the leadership level undermine serious efforts at stable practices. The design of new policies calls for high-level expertise, and indeed the lack of experts in police administration has been a liability. As for corruption, there are no mechanisms and procedures to ensure accountability at all levels of the organization. Equally, there is no strategic plan to combat the culture of corruption and the predominance of the paralegal regime within the organization.

Notes

1. The author is a researcher at the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social. This article is based on a conference paper presented at The Challenges of Criminality for Democratization and the Rule of Law in Latin America, a seminar held at Oxford University, June 17–19, 2004. An earlier version of this paper will be published by the Trans-Border Institute of the University of San Diego, in the monograph: “Militarization and Public Security in Mexico.” Also, some fragments appeared in Imagen y autoimagen de la policía de la Ciudad de México (Azaola, 2006).

2. Although the Metropolitan Area of Mexico City has 19 million inhabitants, the Preventive Police of Mexico City can act only within the perimeter of the Federal District (Distrito Federal), which comprises 9 million inhabitants.

3. Findings from this work are consistent with those found by Suárez de Garay in a study carried out in the Police Department of the City of Guadalajara (2006). See also Rios (2004) and López Ugalde (2003).

4. These findings are consistent with those found in other studies such as Yañez (1999), López Ugalde (2003), and Tello (2005).
5. Article 42 from the Law of Public Security of the Federal District, 1993, in force at the time of the study, states that: “the arrest or detention suffered by a subordinate for significant misdemeanors or for accumulating five warnings in a calendar year can last up to 36 hours.” However, the law does not stipulate which kind of conduct deserves this punishment, which gives bosses ample margin for discretion.


7. Results obtained by other studies also show that corruption is one of the main problems of Mexican police, although it can be compared with that of other Latin American countries. For example, results of the Barometer of the Americas for 2006 show that after Paraguay, Mexico occupies the second place in Latin America, where almost one third of the population (31%) declares that they have paid a bribe in the last 12 months. This percentage rises to 47% in the case of the Mexico City inhabitants who reported having been victims of corruption in 2006. In the same way, the Mexican police obtained the lowest qualification (3.3 in a rank of 1 to 7) regarding the trust citizens have in public institutions (Parás y Coleman, 2006, pp. 56, 61, 79).

References


Azaola


