The Impact of Military Policing Program in Colombia

Abstract

The use of military forces for public security tasks has become a common approach to combat crime and insecurity. Advocates of these “mano dura” (iron fist) policies view them as necessary to control crime, while detractors claim they undermine human rights. In Cali, Colombia, researchers conducted a randomized evaluation of a military policing program called Plan Fortaleza to rigorously measure the impacts of military policing on crime rates and human rights. The results revealed that the military policing program had no impact on crime during implementation and had negative effects after its completion.

Policy Issue

Latin America is the most violent region in the world. In 2018, the homicide rate, a standard indicator for measuring violence, was 22 people for every 100,000 inhabitants; this is four times the world average. In addition, 39 percent of worldwide homicides occurred in the region, although the Latin American population represents only 9 percent of the global population. Forty-one out of the fifty most dangerous cities in the world are located in Latin America. [1]

Insecurity and violence in the region have led many to support “mano dura” (iron fist) policies implemented by governments concerned about persistently high crime rates. These policies generally include strict punitive measures against low-level criminals and minor crimes, the militarization of police forces, the reduction or suspension of due process
guarantees, and the use of military forces for security and policing work. Advocates of these mano dura policies view them as necessary to control crime, while detractors claim they undermine human rights. Examples of military involvement in civilian domestic security abound, from Mexico to the Northern Triangle to Brazil. This strategy is not unique to Latin America. South Africa, for example, has relied on soldiers to reinforce police officers in the field for nearly two decades. Military policing is similarly common in Indonesia and the Philippines, among other countries, where the prevalence of violent crime and organized criminal activity is high. Despite the military’s increasingly prominent role in law enforcement around the developing world, and vocal public support for it, empirical evidence on the efficacy of these interventions remains scarce.

**Context of the Evaluation**

Cali is the third-largest city in Colombia and one of its most violent cities. In 2018, Cali reported a homicide rate of 46.7 people for every 100,000 inhabitants, nearly double the rate of Colombia’s second-largest city, Medellín, and more than triple the rate of the capital, Bogotá. In an effort to reduce the prevalence of crime in the city, Cali’s Security and Justice Secretariat, housed within the Mayor’s Office, deployed the military to patrol crime hot spots as part of an initiative known as “Plan Fortaleza”.

Plan Fortaleza consisted of recurring, intensive vehicular and foot patrols by heavily armed soldiers from the Armed Forces of Colombia in two “comunas” (communes). Cali has 22 “comunas” in total; Plan Fortaleza focused on comunas 18 and 20, both hot spots for crime. The two comunas comprise 30 barrios (neighborhoods), which are further divided into “manzanas” (blocks). Their combined population was approximately 215,000 in 2018.

Researchers partnered with the Cali Mayor’s Office, the Third Brigade of the Colombian Armed Forces, and Innovations for Poverty Action to investigate and evaluate the impact of Plan Fortaleza in Cali.

**Details of the Intervention**

Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation of the Plan Fortaleza program in Cali, Colombia. 1,255 manzanas were randomly selected to receive military patrols; a comparison group received normal police presence. Each of the intervention blocks was assigned to receive 30 minutes of military patrols roughly every six days. In reality, the average time spent patrolling was around 11 minutes per block per day, due in part to the small size of most blocks and the large number of soldiers on patrol.

All patrols occurred from 5:00 PM to midnight Monday to Friday. While on patrol, soldiers searched suspected criminals for possession of drugs and weapons, checked IDs and business licenses, erected roadblocks, detained suspected criminals, and conversed with residents. To maximize the military’s compliance with the intervention, researchers hired civilian monitors to accompany each patrol. Monitors used GPS devices and smartphones equipped with a customized Google Maps interface to help soldiers navigate to their assigned
treatment blocks. The monitors also tracked and reported any abuses perpetrated by soldiers while on patrol. (The monitors recorded just one incident of verbal abuse over the duration of the program.)

To examine the impact of the intervention, researchers used data from the following sources:

1. Administrative crime data from the Colombian National Police, the Mayor’s Office, the Attorney-General’s Office, and the Coroner’s Office, geocoded to the block level; and administrative data on human rights abuses from the Office of the Attorney-General.
2. A household survey of 2,096 randomly selected residents of the two comunas between October 17 and December 19, 2019, beginning while the intervention was ongoing and continuing for roughly a month after it was over.
3. A household survey of 7,921 randomly selected residents and business owners between January 17 and February 25, 2020, between two and three months after the end of the intervention.
4. GPS data and geocoded, timestamped firsthand observations from the civilian monitors hired to accompany the soldiers while on patrol.

Results and Policy Lessons

Plan Fortaleza did not reduce the prevalence of crimes including murders, robberies, illegal drug sales, and illegal possession of weapons, even when the soldiers were physically present on the streets.

Researchers observed a large and statistically significant increase in crime in the weeks after the intervention was complete. Relative to the blocks with no military presence, the researchers found an average of 0.110 more crimes committed on blocks where the military patrolled and .083 more crimes on adjacent blocks. This translates to, in aggregate, 23 more crimes on blocks where the intervention occurred, and 63 more crimes on adjacent blocks between the end of the intervention and the end of the year.

Researchers found no evidence that the program reduced citizens’ reports of crime victimization either during or after the intervention. However, there were increases in citizens’ accounts of (1) witnessing and (2) reporting crimes to the authorities, (3) police presence, and (4) arrests on both intervention and adjacent blocks. These results are consistent with an increase in crime (and a corresponding increase in police activity) after the intervention was complete.

Plan Fortaleza improved subjective perceptions of safety among business owners on participating blocks compared to the blocks where the military wasn’t present. In contrast, the intervention had a weak or even negative impact on residents’ perception of safety.

Researchers found weak evidence of increased human rights abuses by soldiers and stronger but still suggestive evidence of increased abuses by police officers. This finding is specific to the monitoring and final surveys. Researchers found no evidence of increased abuses in administrative data from the Attorney-General’s Office, or in the
firsthand observations of civilian monitors.

To learn more read an article on this study in El Tiempo here and listen to Cerosetenta’s podcast episode here.

Sources


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