

Authors

Robert Blair
Brown University

Guy Grossman
University of Pennsylvania

Anna Wilke
Columbia University

Can Community Policing Improve Police-Community
Relations in an Authoritarian Regime? Experimental
Evidence from Uganda*

Robert A. Blair¹ Guy Grossman² Anna M. Wilke³

Abstract

Throughout the developing world, citizens distrust the police and hesitate to bring crimes to their attention—a suboptimal equilibrium that makes it difficult for the police to effectively combat crime and violence. Community policing has been touted as one solution to this problem, but evidence on its efficacy in developing country contexts is sparse. We present results from a large-scale field experiment that randomly assigned a home-grown community policing intervention to police stations throughout rural Uganda. Drawing on administrative crime data and close to 4,000 interviews with citizens, police officers, and local authorities, we show that community policing had limited effects on core outcomes such as crime, insecurity, and perceptions of the police. We attribute these findings to a combination of turnover, treatment non-compliance, and resource constraints. Our study draws attention to the limits of community policing's potential to reduce crime and build trust in the developing world.

*This project was part of a joint initiative coordinated by the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) network. We wish to extend our gratitude to Genevieve Blair, Fotini Christin, and Jeremy Weinstein for steering the MetaMeta-4 committee and to Joclyn Leaver who provided the initiative with incredible logistical support. We wish to also thank our Ugandan counterparts at the Uganda Police Force, the Office of the Prime Minister and at YIEDO, without which this project would not have been possible. We further thank Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), which oversees all aspects of data collection. Support for this study came from IPA's Peace and Recovery Program, The Economic Development & Institutions (EDI) consortium, and EGAP / DFED. The study received IRB approval from the University of Pennsylvania (protocol # 825645), Columbia University (protocol # AAAS296), Uganda's Ministry of Internal Affairs (ADM 307/326/01), Uganda's National Council for Science and Technology (protocol 55421), and the Midway Uganda Research Ethics Committee (protocol # 6306-2017). The study was also approved by the Uganda Police Force and the Office of the President.

¹Department of Political Science and Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University. Email: robert_blair@brown.edu

²Department of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania. Email: ggros@upenn.edu

³Department of Political Science, Columbia University. Email: aaw2229@columbia.edu

Can Community Policing Improve Police-Community Relations in an Authoritarian Regime? Experimental Evidence from Uganda

Throughout the developing world, citizens distrust the police and hesitate to bring crimes to their attention—a suboptimal equilibrium that makes it difficult for the police to effectively combat crime and violence. Community policing has been touted as one solution to this

problem, but evidence on its efficacy in developing country contexts is sparse. We present results from a large-scale field experiment that randomly assigned a home-grown community policing intervention to police stations throughout rural Uganda. Drawing on administrative crime data and close to 4,000 interviews with citizens, police officers, and local authorities, we show that community policing had limited effects on core outcomes such as crime, insecurity, and perceptions of the police. We attribute these findings to a combination of turnover, treatment non-compliance, and resource constraints. Our study draws attention to the limits of community policing's potential to reduce crime and build trust in the developing world.

February 01, 2022