

EGAP STORIES OF CHANGE

BUILDING PUBLIC TRUST THROUGH POLICE- COMMUNITY MEETINGS

LESSONS FROM COLOMBIA

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EVIDENCE
IN GOVERNANCE
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The Metaketa Initiative is a **collaborative research model** with a mission to improve knowledge about critical governance issues through **rigorous field experiments**. In each Metaketa "round," the initiative coordinates multiple studies on a specific topic or intervention in a variety of countries and contexts.

The fourth Metaketa round focused on **community policing**, with studies in six countries assessing the effects of community policing programs on building citizen trust in police and reducing crime. Here we share the story of an experiment in **Colombia** where researchers used town hall meetings to build trust between citizens and the police and to improve public safety.

The Metaketa Initiative is led by Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) at the University of California, Berkeley. It is partially funded by the UK's Department for International Development and involves a global network of researchers conducting studies in countries around the world.

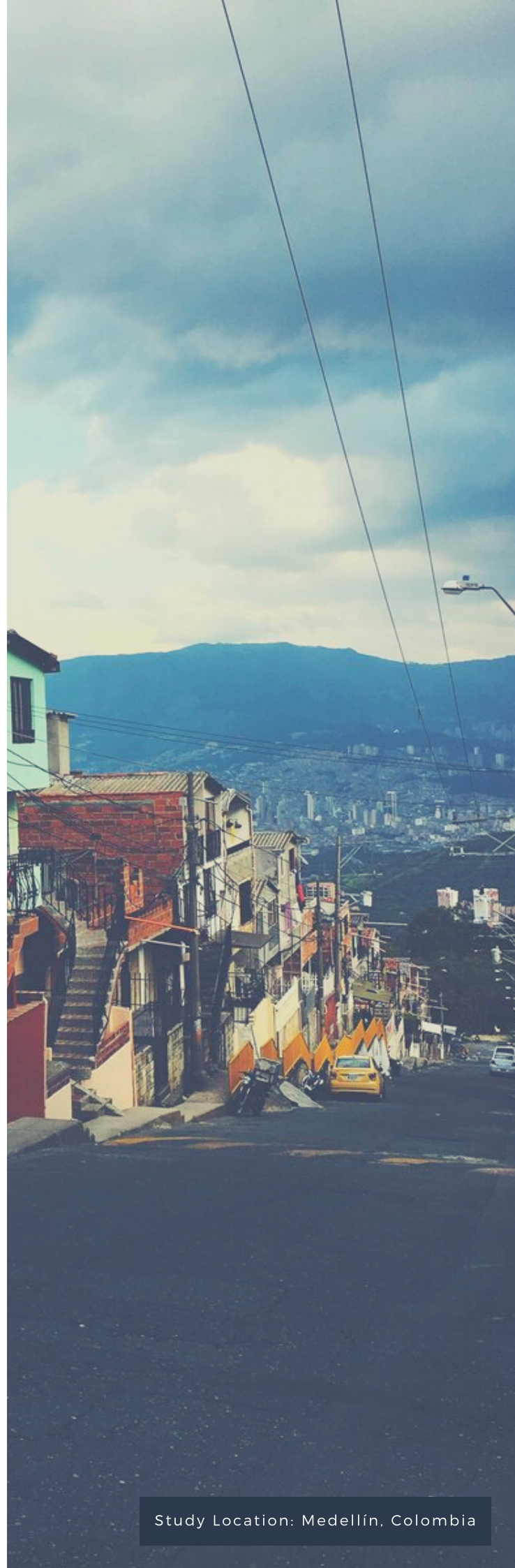
PROJECT COUNTRY: COLOMBIA



PROJECT TIMELINE



BASELINE: APRIL 2018
INTERVENTION: JULY 2018
ENDLINE: DECEMBER 2019



Study Location: Medellín, Colombia

THE CHALLENGE

Citizen mistrust and the police's limited access to on-the-ground information to address crime effectively are impediments to successful law enforcement in Latin America and elsewhere in the developing world. Many countries have adopted community policing strategies as a way to address these issues. In Colombia, for example, the National Police (PN) began implementing certain aspects of community policing in 2009, dividing metropolitan areas of the country into small beats called cuadrantes. Prevention and problem-oriented policing were both explicitly included in the list of guiding principles of the model. While the PN have national jurisdiction, city governments are formally responsible for local citizen security and thus direct some of the operations of the local branch of the PN.

Nine years of experience with the cuadrantes policing model have left city and police officials familiar with the core tenets of community policing

and enthusiastic about its potential benefits. While crime rates in Medellín plummeted over the past decade and while trust in the police has improved, city and police officials have expressed a strong desire to further strengthen police-community relations.

In past collaboration with local academics and in their own internal research, the Security Secretariat has demonstrated a capacity for data collection and analysis, including sophisticated work with GIS data. Several years of high-quality geo-coded administrative data on incident reports, emergency calls, and officer behavior provide an excellent baseline for this study.

“CAN POLICE-COMMUNITY MEETINGS BUILD PUBLIC TRUST?”



María Aracelly Mazo, one of the study's enumerators.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Researchers Eric Arias (William and Mary), Rebecca Hanson (University of Florida), Dorothy Kronick (University of Pennsylvania), and Tara Slough (New York University) created a multifaceted partnership to implement the research. The partnership included the Medellín Metropolitan Police and Security Secretariat, Invamer (a local survey firm), Estrategia & Territorio (a local public affairs firm), and local

TWO-PRONGED APPROACH WITH FREQUENT POLICE- COMMUNITY TOWN- HALL MEETINGS AND A MUTUAL COMMITMENT TO ACTION ITEMS IDENTIFIED

research and intervention coordinators. They sought to test the effects of a two-pronged approach to community policing:

- Frequent town-hall meetings between police officers and citizens
- Mutual commitment to action items at these meetings

The Secretariat and the Medellín police had considered similar programs in the past. For example, the Secretariat and police have coordinated a number of town-hall meetings (called *Consejos de*

Convivencia) at a high level of geographic aggregation called the *comuna*. While some of these meetings have been conducted successfully, they involve only senior police officials (such as station captains) as opposed to beat officers—and both the police and members of the community would like to foster closer connections between beat officers and citizens. Though the Plan Cuadrantes community policing model has been in place since 2010, less than half of Medellín citizens are familiar with it. The goal of the study was to test expanded community outreach.

Research took place in 347 residential police beats. These police beats were grouped in similar blocks of 4 beats, and within each of these blocks, researchers assigned one beat each to their four treatment conditions:

- 1.) No treatment
- 2.) Police-community meetings
- 3.) Informational fliers
- 4.) Police-community meetings + informational fliers

This approach ensured that each treatment arm was demographically similar to the others, guaranteeing that any differences in outcomes across treatment arms could be fairly traceable to the treatments.

Researchers reviewed administrative data regarding thefts, domestic violence incidents, public misconduct incidents, and calls to the police. They also conducted both citizen and police officer surveys to measure trust in the police and citizen cooperation with the police, as well as police views of the community policing model being implemented.

RESULTS

The goal was to study whether an informal model of police-community interaction changes the level of trust in the police, observed cooperation, and rates of crime. The project convened just over 500 police-community meetings across 173 beats (or micro-neighborhoods). They found strong evidence of compliance: residents of treated neighborhoods were much more likely to know about or have attended meetings than residents of control neighborhoods. They also found that, consistent with theory, the intervention improved citizens' perceptions of police officer capacity and (to a lesser extent) their perceptions of officer intentions. In particular, these residents became more likely to say that the police have the capacity to investigate crimes and respond to incidents in a timely manner. The residents in treated neighborhoods also became slightly more likely to say that the police have good intentions, such as taking cases seriously and treating people fairly.

With regard to other outcomes, the team found no evidence of effects on crime, crime reporting, police abuse, or officer beliefs. While this does little to support the main hypothesis of this Metaketa round, that community policing is effective for reducing crime (Blair, Christia, and Weinstein, 2020), it may be due to the aspects of the Colombian context, specifically. For example, the neighborhoods that were included in this study were very small and incidence of crimes in these areas was highly variable. As such, the lack of effects on these outcomes were maybe a consequence of the research design, rather than evidence against a key part of the theory proposed in this Metaketa round.

513

Number of police-community meetings held across the hundreds of neighborhoods.

19

Likelihood that citizens had heard of or attended a police-community meeting increased by 19 percentage points.

LESSONS + IMPACT

Perhaps the most important lesson learned from this study is that police-community meetings can impact citizens' perceptions of the police. In this case, while only one in every twelve adults attended at least one of the police-community meetings in their neighborhood, community attitudes towards the police improved.

Throughout this project, the research team worked closely with the Medellín

Metropolitan Police, who were deeply invested in the project and were particularly interested in the results of the police surveys conducted. The ranking lieutenant who worked with the project team understood the importance of rigorous research and evaluation. She was a strong advocate of randomizing the intervention and is now using this method with other programs the police are implementing to evaluate their impact.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

As researchers and practitioners continue to study community policing, here are a few questions for further consideration:

- Can community policing be used effectively by new and reconstituted police forces in contexts in which the legitimacy of the state is challenged?
- What are strategies for reducing insecurity between citizens and the police?
- What factors contribute to insecurity between citizens and the police?
- Does community involvement increase police accountability?

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LEARN MORE

For additional information and technical details about this study, visit the [project webpage](#).

For more on the researcher / implementing partner relationship, read [Partnership Lessons 9: Colombia Community / Police Meetings and Fliers with a Multifaceted Partnership](#).

Explore other projects in the [Metaketa IV round](#).

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