

COMMUNITY POLICING OR ZERO TOLERANCE?
*Preferences of Police Officers from 22 Countries in Transition*¹
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BACKGROUND

This study is the first of a two part series that examines the relationship between police deployment preferences and national political transition. Since the 1970s, approximately 60 countries in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa have experienced major political transitions in their modes of governance, specifically from authoritarian to relatively more liberal and democratic forms. In comparative criminal justice, this transformational era provides a unique opportunity for researchers to explore the relationship between this transition and justice agency and agent behavior. Transformations in governance can result in important changes in criminal justice practices, which can affect the relationship between the state and society, and in turn, further affect governance. This may be especially true in policing, which is arguably the most public display of government authority during times of transition and normalcy. This study examines this relationship by measuring officer preferences for styles of crime control deployment in countries at various stages of political transition.

METHOD

I surveyed and conducted informal focus groups with 315 police officials from 22 nations in this pilot study (the second study involves officers from over 35 nations). With the aid of simultaneous and written translation, I probed officer preferences between two different styles of deployment – community policing and zero tolerance approaches. These two choices were selected because one is perceived to be more democratically oriented (community policing) and the other (zero tolerance) more authoritarian. These officials came from regions that had experienced major political transformations in the wave of liberalization beginning in the 1970s: Africa (Malawi, Mozambique, and Tanzania), Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, the Kyrgyz Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) and South America (Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Peru). Their preference between community-oriented policing and zero-tolerance approaches was recorded, as well as individual information (limited due to the nature of the study), and political, economic, and demographic information about their countries. Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) was employed.

FINDINGS

Findings suggest that police from more democratically consolidated countries prefer community-oriented policing over zero-tolerance approaches. Interesting regional effects were discovered, especially when comparing officials from Latin/South America and Eastern Europe/ Central Asia. Officers from Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which had pre-transition legacies of Soviet communism and whose transitions were more recent, were less likely to prefer community-oriented policing, while South and Central American officers were more likely to prefer community-oriented policing over zero tolerance approaches. Additionally, levels of homicide was not a statistically significant predictor of policing style preference. Group discussions reinforced these statistical findings. This study provides some support for the often hypothesized belief that community policing efforts are also more “democratic”, although caution should be exercised in making such generalizations, as discussed in this paper.

¹ Lum, C. (2009). *Community Policing or Zero Tolerance?: Preferences of Police Officers from 22 Countries in Transition*. *British Journal of Criminology*, 49(6): 788-809.