

EGAP STORIES OF CHANGE

BUILDING TRUST AND IMPROVING POLICE EFFECTIVENESS

LESSONS FROM LIBERIA

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EVIDENCE
IN GOVERNANCE
AND POLITICS



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 **Liberia** where researchers test whether community policing can build confidence in the police, increase crime reporting, improve information sharing, and ultimately reduce the incidence of crime.

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: LIBERIA



PROJECT TIMELINE

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BASELINE: JULY 2017
INTERVENTION: JANUARY 2018
ENDLINE: JANUARY 2019



Police officers conduct a foot patrol in a Monrovia neighborhood.

THE CHALLENGE

Despite more than a decade of police reform, residents of urban Liberia continue to suffer from regular crime and violence. According to the 2015 Afrobarometer survey, 65 percent of urban Liberians reported that they or someone they knew was a victim of theft in the past year, while 35 percent reported that they or someone they knew was physically assaulted. These figures are considerably higher than those for urban, sub-Saharan Africa overall, and they imply that urban Liberia ranks among sub-Saharan Africa's most crime-ridden places to live.

Many observers attribute Liberia's high rate of crime to a combination of capacity constraints within the Liberian National Police (LNP) and high unemployment among Monrovia's urban poor. While these factors are undoubtedly important contributors, they are difficult to address directly, making them ill-suited for policy intervention. Another factor often attributed to police ineffectiveness in urban Liberia: the reluctance of citizens to cooperate with the police through activities such as crime reporting, information sharing, and evidence provision. According to 2012 survey data, for example, fewer than half of crimes that occur in urban Liberia are actually reported to the police. Among crimes that are reported, officers of the LNP

force often have difficulty investigating due to the reluctance of citizens to provide information. As a result, the vast majority of crimes reported to the police do not result in prosecution.

In settings where mistrust of the police is high, as in urban Monrovia, multiple issues prevent those who would otherwise be willing to assist from doing so. According to survey data, most Monrovians lack knowledge about police procedures. In an environment that discourages working with police, the lack of a secure, anonymous mechanism to share information with the police also contributes to a sub-optimal equilibrium. These twin absences make it difficult for the police to prevent crime, reduce misconduct, and build trust. And because under-reporting undermines even well-resourced police, these barriers hinder the effectiveness of ongoing reforms within the police force, preventing them from reaching their full potential.

CAN POLICE-COMMUNITY MEETINGS AND POLICE FOOT PATROLS BUILD PUBLIC TRUST?



RESEARCH DESIGN



Police officers wait for the police-community town-hall meeting to begin.

THREE-PRONGED APPROACH WITH FREQUENT POLICE-COMMUNITY TOWN-HALL MEETINGS, FOOT PATROLS, AND A MUTUAL COMMITMENT TO ACTION ITEMS IDENTIFIED

Recognizing the need to build trust, educate citizens about the criminal justice system, and raise awareness about reforms within the LNP, the Inspector General has made community outreach a top priority. Within Monrovia, each of its 10 precincts now hosts a community relations officer whose main responsibility is to lead community outreach activities and handle requests and complaints from community dwellers. Precinct commanders across the country now hold regular meetings with community leaders and direct street-level officers to patrol hotspot neighborhoods on foot.

Motivated by the LNP's dedication to community policing, forward-orientation, and openness to collaboration, Ben Morse and Lily Tsai at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology collaborated with the LNP's Community Services Department to standardize the

content of outreach activities and evaluate its effectiveness through a randomized controlled trial.

The research team worked with officers of Monrovia's 10 police precincts to identify high-crime communities that would benefit from improved relations with the police. The intervention included three components:

- 1.) Monthly police-community town-hall meetings
- 2.) Semi-regular foot patrols where officers interacted directly with citizens to solicit feedback and distribute informational flyers
- 3.) Information about the police's "Watch Forum" initiative, which calls for communities to assist the police through crime reporting, information sharing, and proactive monitoring of security threats

RESULTS

This project examines the impact of community policing on crime, crime reporting, and trust in the police in Monrovia, Liberia. Combining data from a large-scale resident survey with crime reporting data from the LNP, the project found that community policing led to modest but meaningful improvements in perceptions of police intentions and capacity, strengthened social norms against vigilantism, and mobilized communities to participate in the police's "Watch Forum" initiative by forming and sustaining local security groups. These changes were accompanied by a roughly 40 percent reduction in the incidence of mob violence in treatment communities relative to control communities over a one year period.

Despite these improvements, the program did not reduce the overall incident of crime, improve perceptions of security, or increase crime reporting.

In terms of mechanisms, analysis suggests the programs' impacts were driven primarily by the town hall meetings and participation in the watch forum initiative, rather than greater police presence or changes to police strategy, which did not change substantively during the course of the study.

270

Number of town hall meetings held across the 45 treatment communities.

40%

Reduced incidence of mob violence by 40 percent.

LESSONS + IMPACT

Perhaps the most important lesson learned from this study is that police-community meetings can have an impact on changing citizens' perceptions of the police. In this case, Liberia's form of community policing is effective at improving community attitudes towards the police, mobilizing support for community watch forums, and reducing incidences of mob violence and support for vigilantism.

While the results are mixed, this research project has impacted

the LNP's community policing policies in a substantive way. The Inspector General of the LNP has not only praised the work being carried out by precincts where these programs have been implemented, but has also decided to base his National Policing Strategy on it. The focus, he has said, will be on a conflict sensitive community policing strategy. His community based approach has already provided a major contribution to a peaceful election process during the fall 2017 elections.

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 10: Liberia Community Policing with Parley Liberia](#).

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

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