Making Police Reform Matter in Latin America

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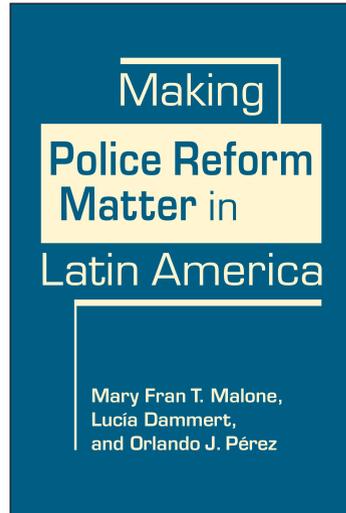
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The Challenges of
Police Reform in
Latin America

HEADLINES THROUGHOUT LATIN AMERICA HIGHLIGHT THE PROB-
lems of police abuse and misconduct. In April 2018, the Nicaraguan National
Police openly attacked demonstrators, and overt, systematic police repres-
sion against dissidents and demonstrators has continued from 2018 to the
present day.[1] In October 2019, the Carabineros de Chile unleashed exces-
sive force against demonstrators, leading to a month of widespread reports
of police abuse and violence against protesters and detainees.[2] United
Nations investigators denounced the "fundamentally repressive manner" of
the Carabineros' reactions to demonstrations and called for prosecution of
the army and police for human rights violations, which included unlawful
killings and torture (United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High
Commissioner 2019). In April 2021, the Colombian National Police tar-
geted protesters with excessive force, leading to beatings, mass detentions,
and even killings of demonstrators (Human Rights Watch 2021). Journalists
chronicling the cycles of protest and police violence drew parallels to
Colombia's prior crackdowns on insurgents and paramilitaries, noting that
the police treated "civilian protesters as battlefield enemies" (Turkewitz
and Villamil 2021).

    The tragedy of these clashes between police and protesters was not just
the toll they took on human rights. These episodes also undermined the
legitimacy of police forces that had previously earned praise for their
reforms. The Chilean and Nicaraguan forces in particular had been com-
mended for building police–community ties, respecting citizen rights, and
engaging with local communities. The Colombian police earned accolades
for increasing levels of professionalism and efficiency and initiating some
community-oriented initiatives in major cities. Historically, Latin American

police forces have been regarded as corrupt, inefficient, and even abusive, but over the past thirty years, police forces like those of Colombia, Nicaragua, and Chile had shed much of this reputation. Despite being once dismissed as hopeless, police reform had appeared to gain at least some traction in Latin America.

This improvement came as welcome news. In the 1980s and 1990s, most Latin American countries had discarded dictatorships in favor of democracies and implemented sweeping economic reforms. Amid these transformations, observers lamented that one institution stubbornly remained mired in the past: the police (González 2020). Democratic reformers bemoaned the fact that despite efforts to modernize and professionalize the police and transform it into a fundamental part of maintaining order and serving citizens in a democracy, the police remained tied to their authoritarian traditions and structures. Historically, policing in Latin America had a political dimension, as police served to support the power of incumbent governments and control citizens. Especially in the 1970s and 1980s, military dictatorships incorporated police institutions as fuerzas de choque (repressive forces), as police (alongside the military) were often the actors who repressed political opponents and the public more broadly. Under authoritarian rule, the primary objective of the police was typically protecting the regime and its major stakeholders, and the police often relied heavily on the indiscriminate use of force to achieve this goal (Huggins 1998). Furthermore, networks of party-affiliated activists permeated police ranks, and appointments to sensitive posts were often based on political affiliation or personal affinity. In many cases, high-level political actors determined police-related decisions, including strategic and operational issues.

In the 1980s and 1990s, democratization brought a change to policing practices, or at least it was supposed to (Sozzo 2016). Democratic governments ostensibly shifted the primary role of the police, limiting their use for political purposes (e.g., to repress political opponents) and deploying police primarily to ensure security, control crime, and develop public security policies (Dammert 2019). Indeed, prior to police crackdowns on protestors, Chile, Colombia, and Nicaragua had distinguished themselves for implementing major changes. Before 2019, the Chilean police had been highly regarded domestically and internationally, despite their complicity in the Pinochet dictatorship of 1973–1990 (Dammert 2012b). Chileans consistently reported that their police forces were far less likely to solicit bribes or abuse citizens' rights compared with their counterparts in other Latin American countries (Latin American Public Opinion Project 2010). National crime rates have remained low in Chile, and homicide rates fall below the US average, on par with European countries. Chile also pioneered the inclusion of the community in its crime control policies, launching a series of initiatives to include citizens' input in designing neighborhood-based security strategies (Frühling 2009).

Nicaragua also fundamentally overhauled its institutions to orient police toward local communities. Prior to 2018, Nicaragua had spurned the *mano dura* (iron fist) policies of the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) and implemented holistic public security policies that sought to address the root causes of crime. Indeed, Nicaragua's reforms and crime trends were perhaps the most surprising exception to regional problems with policing and crime. Nicaraguan history is marked by endemic poverty and political violence, just like its neighbors of the Northern Triangle; however, its crime rates are comparable to its more peaceful and prosperous neighbor to the south, Costa Rica.

Colombia reported successes in professionalizing its police, and some observers even touted the Colombian model as a candidate for exportation. Advocates of the Colombian public security model pointed to the dramatic security transformations in the country over twenty years, particularly in the capital city of Bogotá (Moncada 2009). In the mid-1990s, Colombia was infamous as the murder capital of the world, and police and justice institutions were widely disparaged as hopelessly corrupt (Esparza 2022). By 2008, public security in Colombia had improved so much that the tourism board launched a new campaign with the ad "Colombia, the only risk is wanting to stay." In 2017, Colombia reported its lowest homicide rate in forty years. For those looking for a quick fix to the contemporary Central American security crisis, the Colombian public security model seemed to hold a lot of promise (Shifter 2012).

In other countries, smaller reforms reshaped the police. Ecuador launched a series of technological advances, such as the creation of ECU911, which led to the decrease in the incidence of crime. Uruguay experienced some institutional transformation and modernization of police work, and Costa Rica initiated a new system of community police formation. In Honduras, a country with some of the highest violent crime rates in the world, the government launched a new system of police education, which aimed to professionalize the police force and use other crime-fighting tools besides strict repression (Ungar 2015). Panama invited Chilean consultants to inform the implementation of a civilian community policing model in cities, aiming to integrate police officers more cohesively into the communities they serve. Panamanian reformers also sought to increase professional standards among police by raising salaries and improving training. Civil society groups tie these reforms to improved professionalism on the streets and a reduction in bribe solicitation from average citizens in urban areas.[3]

Although there have been plenty of setbacks, such as the excessive use of violence against protesters, it is undeniable that the police institutions of the 2020s are very different than their predecessors of the 1990s. Institutional and administrative transformations have professionalized police careers, raised salaries, and developed systems of social protection for officers. These improvements are matched with raised educational prerequisites

for candidates entering the police force, as well as ongoing institutionalized processes of evaluation, both of which help promote transparency and accountability (Tello 2012). Reformers developed diverse strategies to improve the design and implementation of police work (both preventative and of control) and evidence-based crime control strategies (Sherman 2013). There are some mechanisms for a public accounting of police action to citizens (González 2016; Muggah 2017; Ungar 2019). Perhaps most important, there has been widespread acknowledgment that the police should establish (and deepen) a strong, constant, active, and positive relationship with citizens. Most police institutions in the region have created community policing programs, and while the results are often mixed, such efforts are a step forward (Dammert 2019).

Despite these gains, persistent and overt police misconduct, particularly in countries that had appeared to engage in serious reforms, gives observers pause. The recent high-profile examples of police abuse seemed to erase prior gains and raised questions about the sustainability of police reform.

What does it take for successful reforms to be implemented, and how can they be sustained? To evaluate the emergence and sustainability of police reforms, we trace the process of reform and police–society relationships in several cases that had reported some successes by the early twenty-first century: Chile, Colombia, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and Uruguay. We also assess reform efforts in Peru, where best practices were introduced but never gained traction. Peru is an understudied case for analyses of public security, and we can learn from some of the stifled reform efforts.

The turn of the millennium witnessed the emergence of best policing practices, and we can learn a great deal from some initial successes as well as the inevitable pitfalls. We aim to synthesize what we can learn from the emergence of these best practices and their setbacks. To do so, we follow three steps. First, we identify and describe the best practices of police reform that emerged in the region since the 1990s. Second, we trace the process of creating and implementing these best practices in individual cases, noting the contextual factors (particularly levels of crime and social welfare) that facilitated success and those that thwarted reform efforts. We focus heavily on police–society relations and evaluate reform efforts at least partially on their ability to boost public trust in the police. Finally, we assess the sustainability of these best practices. The Colombian, Nicaraguan, and Chilean cases all illustrate the importance of sustainability and the tragic consequences for human rights when hard-earned gains are undermined. Other cases illustrate the problems of sustainability in more subtle ways. For example, Costa Rica was once highlighted as a public security success story, but contemporary trends have tarnished this reputation. Public trust in the police and in the justice system more broadly dipped sharply in the 2010s, and Costa Rican officials themselves have lamented that current crime trends

have left their justice system *sobre cargado* (overburdened). Costa Ricans register high levels of public insecurity in national surveys, data corroborated by very visible investments in private security throughout society. To date, it is not clear whether these recent developments will undermine the Costa Rican success story. Do these trends reveal previously overlooked flaws? Or are they merely small setbacks in a longer history of success?

This book examines the process of police reform and police–society relations in two understudied cases: Uruguay and Panama. Police reforms in these countries have received less fanfare, despite the fact that the reforms have registered steady and tangible improvements in terms of professionalism and linkages to local communities. In a final case study, we highlight another understudied case, Peru, in which best practices were introduced but failed to flourish.

How Do Best Practices Emerge, and How Can They Be Sustained?

How can we explain why some Latin American police forces have successfully reformed, while others have not? How do we determine whether these best practices are sustainable in the long run? We draw on insights from the literatures of path dependency and police legitimacy to examine the institutional and micro-level factors that can shape the outcomes of the reform process. We argue that a modified path dependency best explains the institutional process by which policy reforms are adopted, perpetuated, and revised. At the micro level, we argue that these reforms can increase the legitimacy of the police when they improve police effectiveness, reduce corruption, and uphold human rights. When police reforms increase the legitimacy of police in the eyes of the public, public security policies that are more community-oriented, less repressive, and more preventative become more viable. If the public and major stakeholders perceive public security policies as successful, they become more firmly entrenched and provide fertile ground for additional reforms.

The (Modified) Path Dependency of Police Reforms: Understanding the Institutional Challenges

In most regimes, structural and historical conditions determine policy choices regarding policing and crime prevention. The type of regime (electoral democracies versus military-led governments), crime levels, economic development, and inequality (among other factors) lay the foundations for what is possible in the policy arena. Path dependency argues that institutional choices are mediated by structural conditions until a "critical juncture" (or

a moment of choice) forces policymakers to choose a different path, which then shapes the underlying conditions.[4] The choices made during critical junctures establish the institutional patterns that endure over time. As those patterns then shape policymakers' decisions and behavior, they influence political and social outcomes, which in turn could develop into new critical junctures that undermine the stability of the prevailing institutional patterns, potentially precipitating further policy changes.

Authoritarianism and militarism shaped the origins and evolution of police institutions in the cases we analyze. In each country, police institutions emerged out of democratization processes, which were shaped by key critical junctures such as civil wars, military invasions, high rates of violent crime, electoral defeats, or geopolitical pressures. Fragile and often weak democracies led to underresourced, corrupt, and weak police institutions, which led to increasing crime and lack of institutional legitimacy. Crime and weak legitimacy precipitated an additional period of change in which policymakers were forced to adopt institutional changes to strengthen policing practices by increasing funding, cracking down on corruption, separating military and police functions, and adopting community policing strategies that aimed to reduce the social gap between police officers and citizens.

At the institutional level, we argue that two key factors explain how successful police reforms emerge after these critical junctures: institutional stability and sustained political will. Institutional stability is critical, as the reform process requires continuity to see proposed changes through the design phase to implementation and evaluation. Sustained political will, preferably across political parties, is also essential given the scope and complexity of the reform process. Typically, reforms encounter significant political and institutional resistance. As González (2020) explains, politicians are often hesitant to engage in police reform because they fear it can be electorally disadvantageous, and they do not want to antagonize the powerful police bureaucracy. Building political consensus on the need for police reforms is essential for overcoming such obstacles. If a critical body of political actors does not advocate for reforms, or worse impedes them, even the best-designed reforms will wither and face the risk of backsliding.

Police Legitimacy at the Micro Level

We argue that when police reforms lead to improvements in police performance (e.g., effectiveness, fairness, levels of corruption, respect for human rights and civil liberties), the public finds reason to trust the police, creating incentives for public security policies that emphasize prevention and community orientation over repression and militarization. Alternatively, if critical junctures and institutional choices lead away from effective reforms and fail to improve on problems of effectiveness, corruption, and abuse, public trust will remain low.

The literature on police legitimacy illuminates the relationship between police performance and legitimacy. As Lum and Nagin (2017) argue, in democracies citizen trust in police matters in its own right and is a critical performance metric. Police must ensure public safety, but they must also garner citizen trust. Public trust is essential, for if citizens view the police as corrupt, inefficient, or abusive, they will be reluctant to turn to police for protection or to solve problems in their communities or homes (Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tankebe 2013).[5] As Tyler (2004) emphasizes, the police need the support and cooperation of the public to fulfill their central role of maintaining order, and this support and cooperation are contingent on whether the public views the police as a legitimate actor.

Many studies on police legitimacy highlight the importance of procedural legitimacy, focusing heavily on how fairly people perceive they are treated (e.g., Tyler 2004). According to this line of research, if the police treat citizens fairly and equally, citizens will trust the police and support them, even if they disagree with the ultimate outcome. More important than the results of an individual case, if people perceive the process and the treatment they received as fair and according to the law, they have a greater tendency to accept the outcome (Tyler 1990).

Although most of this procedural justice literature focuses on the United States and Europe, which experience very different levels and types of crime, the few studies conducted in developing countries have found support for this school of thought in cases as disparate as El Salvador (Cruz 2015), Argentina (Haas et al. 2015), India (Madan and Nalla 2015), Nigeria (Akinlabi and Murphy 2017), and the Caribbean (Johnson, Maguire, and Kuhns 2014). Even after taking into account the particularities of these different cases, especially in terms of levels of insecurity and corruption, there are indications that procedural justice matters a great deal for police legitimacy.

Another strand of literature highlights the importance of results—especially in countries facing a crisis in security. This perspective argues that what matters most to people, especially those facing unprecedented levels of personal insecurity, is the effectiveness of police—that is, their ability to achieve goals such as controlling crime and apprehending suspected criminals. For example, Tankebe's (2009) work in Ghana finds that public cooperation with the police depends heavily on their perceptions of police effectiveness in fighting crime. Indeed, several studies have noted that crime victimization can reduce public trust in police (Corbacho, Philipp and Ruiz-Vega 2015; Malone and Dammert 2020). In Latin America, there is often limited confidence that the police will prevent or control crime. This perception is not far from reality, as several indicators highlight ongoing challenges in this area. For example, if a suspect is not detained during the commission of a crime, the crime often goes unpunished. Criminal investigation capacities of police personnel are very limited, and although there is increasing investment in technology and training, results

are still modest. Citizens often do not report crimes because they feel the police (and the general criminal justice system) will not do anything. Police presence on the streets is limited, and in most countries police ride in cars instead of patrol on foot, further eroding the possibility of establishing a relationship with the community. Highly centralized institutions are often a bureaucratic nightmare, leaving comisarias (precincts) with limited infrastructure and a general sense of precariousness.

The literature focusing specifically on the legitimacy of Latin American police forces emphasizes the impact of corruption and police misconduct on police legitimacy. Indeed, systemic corruption has been a leading factor weakening public trust in police and inhibiting reform efforts. Corrupt practices have taken a toll on public trust in police. These corrupt practices range from daily instances of soliciting bribes from citizens to structural institutional decisions tainted by irregular practices. Tankebe (2010) finds that even vicarious experiences of police corruption, such as witnessing the police solicit a bribe from other citizens, can shape individual perceptions of police legitimacy.

In some countries, corruption is a daily element of police work and almost recognized as a regular "bureaucratic" practice. To improve the standing of police, reformers have long aimed to stamp out acts of petty and institutional corruption. For example, in Peru, during the government of Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000), the transit police underwent a complete overhaul, transforming into an almost all-woman force to disrupt deeply ingrained, regular corrupt practices. In Argentina, the police of the city of Buenos Aires was created in 2016 to ensure quality of service and better police capacity, but also to limit corrupt practices of other police institutions, such as the Federal Police and the police of the province of Buenos Aires.

The police on the street are not the only "bad apples," of course; there are structural problems that have consolidated a culture of illegality. Institutional corruption is widespread and includes political actors that take a piece of general contracts, especially those with links to infrastructural needs, such as cars, uniforms, or gasoline. Even those cases considered by the literature as the very best practices have shown severe problems of corruption. As we explain in the case studies of Colombia and Chile, even when street-level bribes are less common, institutional corruption can still flourish. Unfortunately, corruption is a problem to which no police force is immune in Latin America. As a response, purge of police personnel has become a regular practice in countries as disparate as Colombia and Honduras, the latter of which expelled almost half the National Police in 2017–2018. In Mexico, one of the constant elements of police reform initiatives is implementing "trust measures" that include all types of tests to ensure proper police conduct; for example, all police officers were obliged to take a polygraph test starting with the Calderón administration (2006–2012).

In addition to corruption, police respect of human rights and civil liberties is a key determinant of police legitimacy and an area targeted by many reform efforts. Several Latin American police forces have earned infamous reputations for excessive use of violence; in the world of social media, these abuses are widely disseminated and potentially have an even greater impact on citizens. Even though Latin Americans clamor for more control, more police presence, and more punishment for criminals, these highly visible signs of police excess are not welcome. In fact, many police-related scandals are rooted in regular police practices in which the use of violence is the norm rather than the exception.[6] The Brazilian case is perhaps the most notable, since more than 33,000 people were killed in police shootings between 2010 and 2020, and more than 9,000 in Rio de Janeiro during this same period (HRW 2020b). As this trend continues to increase, civil society organizations and international nongovernmental institutions have pressed for changes and reforms. Brazil may be the most notorious case, but by no means is it an isolated one, as there are judicial processes against police for their participation in homicides, injuries, and torture in several countries.

In sum, the literature on police legitimacy identifies several factors that shape levels of public trust in police. This trust is often linked to perceptions that the police treat citizens fairly and equally (procedural justice), are effective in controlling crime and responding to citizens' needs, do not engage in bribery, and respect citizens' human rights and civil liberties. To be sure, these perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as police legitimacy can depend on all these factors.

Socioeconomic Context

Modified path dependency can help us understand the institutional environment in which the reform process unfolds, and the police legitimacy literature illuminates how these reforms can culminate into more positive attitudes toward police at the micro level. Police reforms do not occur in a vacuum, of course, so it is important to consider the larger socioeconomic and historical context in which these reforms have unfolded. In areas where racial, ethnic, and or other socioeconomic divides are sharply pronounced, the population might want different things from the police (González 2020). Indeed, in many Latin American countries, police often act as "border guards," shielding the middle and upper classes of society from the lower classes. As community-oriented policing reforms were proliferating around the region, Chevigny (1999) cautioned that particularly in poor neighborhoods, police officers often had a "shoot first, ask questions later" approach that led to the arbitrary use of excessive and deadly violence. In countries with high levels of inequality, police frequently do not view themselves as

part of the communities they protect and are trained to subdue citizens rather than protect them. Police force is yielded almost exclusively against the lower classes. Such misconduct is reinforced by the courts, which often decline to prosecute misuses of power and even ignore evidence of police misbehavior when pursuing convictions against defendants (Ungar 2002, 84). Because excessive uses of force are usually targeted against citizens of lower socioeconomic status, there is acceptance of these practices by both officials and citizens from other socioeconomic classes. Indeed, this acceptance has been heightened by rising levels of fear of crime (Rosen, Cutrona, and Lindquist 2023).

In countries with sharp racial or ethnic divisions, members of the dominant group might expect the police to act as border guards between racial groups, thinking of calls to the police in the same vein as "calling the manager." In these settings, people in the racial minority might be slow to call the police, if they do so at all, anticipating that the arrival of the police will have a high potential to lead to force, violence, or other sanctions against them. In such cases, people of a racial, ethnic, or economically marginalized group might only call the police as a last resort, when something occurs beyond the capacity of informal networks to handle. Such stark racial and ethnic divisions, which are almost always accompanied by socioeconomic divides, can lead police reforms to replicate prior patterns of racial and ethnic conflicts. Amar (2010) notes that even when police reforms prioritize diversity and include members from historically marginalized groups in policing and public security debates, they still run the risk of reproducing earlier trends of conflict and police repression if they do not simultaneously address structural inequalities, which are often reinforced by racial, ethnic, and economic divisions. If reforms merely paper over historical legacies of racial, ethnic, and income inequality, they are unlikely to fundamentally alter how police interact with citizens from all classes and racial groups.

In contrast, in areas in which sharp socioeconomic, racial, or ethnic cleavages are absent or minimal, there is likely more uniformity in what the public expects of police. Lower levels of inequality can lead the public to have similar expectations of police and make similar demands, and they may facilitate police responses that engage the community as a whole rather than privilege one group over another.

In a comparative analysis of local police reforms in Brazil and Honduras, Arias and Ungar (2009) explain the importance of socioeconomic context, noting that community-oriented policing reforms tend to succeed when societal incorporation is matched with political commitment and police cooperation. They argue that community-oriented initiatives need to engage citizens and must create the space and conditions for citizens to mediate with local officials and the police. High levels of inequality and discrimination can marginalize some parts of the citizenry and keep them from having a voice in public security policy. In an analysis of community-

oriented policing programs at the local level, Arias and Ungar (2009, 425) find that one key reason some programs ran more smoothly and gained traction was due to their ability to combine policing reforms with investments in social programs. When sustained in the long run, such social programs can begin to ameliorate socioeconomic cleavages and allow citizens to have a voice in public policy on more equal footing. In the short run, investment in social programs can translate to more resources for underprivileged groups and reduce dependence on illicit activities for basic livelihoods.

We explore how this broader socioeconomic context has shaped the reform process in our cases. We provide a qualitative historical overview of the reform process in each country and note the ways the reform process overcame (or was stymied by) historical legacies of inequality. For example, in our studies of Costa Rica and Uruguay, we note that the processes of police reform were set against the backdrop of a social welfare state. In Nicaragua and at the subnational level of Colombia, the reform process was buttressed by cross-cutting investments in social welfare programs. We argue that in countries with higher levels of inequality and/or racial/ethnic cleavages, police reforms have a greater likelihood of success when they are accompanied by these investments in social welfare and human capital. When investments in justice reform are matched with those of social protection, these reforms can bolster one another and provide a more holistic response to addressing crime.

Public Security Policy Options and Preferences

Modified path dependency helps explain why different institutional configurations of reform emerge, and the literature on police legitimacy helps us understand how these reforms can shape the micro-level perceptions of citizens. Both institutional reforms and public perceptions condition public security policy options. When police performance is poor and legitimacy is low, the number of viable public security policy options narrows considerably. That is, if police forces are poorly trained, are poorly paid, have little oversight, and are viewed as illegitimate in the eyes of the public, it is difficult to expect such forces to implement a holistic community-oriented policing strategy. Instead, lackluster police performance and public mistrust can create incentives among politicians and citizens to embrace repressive, mano dura policies, particularly when crime rates are high. When such repressive policies fail (as they overwhelmingly do), lack of trust in the police leads the public and politicians to seek alternative actors (e.g., private security forces or the military) or endorse increasingly draconian crime-fighting measures. Extralegal options can become more appealing, leading citizens to turn to other actors (ranging from private security guards to vigilante groups) to mete out justice or provide adequate protection. Furthermore, when political elites doubt the efficacy of their own police forces, they tend

to turn to alternative actors.[7] Policymakers justify these choices by arguing that citizens prioritize results: the public wants to confront criminality effectively and decisively and is less interested in how these results are achieved. Despite the frequency of such rhetoric, in most cases these alternative actors have proven to be no better than police in controlling crime, and they create new problems because they lack adequate training to interact with civilian populations and they elude legal mechanisms for accountability and oversight (Ungar 2007; Malone 2012). Under this scenario, it is not uncommon for countries to experience spirals of increasing militarization and deteriorating public security. When police reforms flounder and do not lead to better outcomes in these areas or fail to garner public trust, critical junctures can emerge where countries can "fall out" of this virtuous circle and become mired in an undesirable status quo/equilibrium. Thus, to avoid the problems posed by military, extralegal, or private actors, it is imperative to identify how professional civilian police forces can connect with the communities they are supposed to serve.

In contrast, when public trust in the police increases, public security policies that are more community-oriented, less repressive, and more preventative become more viable. When the police are regarded as legitimate actors, policymakers have more public security options; higher levels of trust create incentives for different types of public security policies. If these policies are viewed as successful in the eyes of the public and major stakeholders, they become more firmly entrenched and provide fertile ground for additional reforms to promote further improvement.

Bailey (2009) articulates a similar dynamic between crime and democratic governance. He argues that crime often weakens the institutional and societal foundations of democratic governance, and weaker democracies find themselves ill equipped to maintain security in their borders. Increasing crime and violence can induce a moment of inflection for policymakers in which critical choices can either break or perpetuate the vicious circle. If the cycle becomes self-reinforcing, new democracies become ensnared in a security trap. We argue that when reforms fail to rectify poor police performance (e.g., effectiveness, levels of corruption, respect for human rights and civil liberties), this leads to low levels of public trust, and low levels of public trust in turn lead to limited public security policy options.

In this book, we identify the institutional and structural factors that shaped policing and examine the key policy choices made by elites during critical moments of regime stress. In particular, we focus on the importance of institutional stability, sustained political will, and cross-cutting investments in human capital. We identify the places in which best practices emerged and trace the process of their creation and implementation. We then turn to the micro level and explain how successful police reforms can foster public trust, particularly when the public perceives police as effective, noncorrupt, and respectful of their human rights. When police reforms

succeed at both the institutional and micro levels, nonrepressive public security policies become more viable. In sum, we argue that successful police reforms foster higher levels of public trust, which in turn are less conducive to repressive public security policies (i.e., mano dura).

Plan of the Book

In the pages that follow, we study the context in which national police institutions emerged, analyze the critical junctures that shaped early policy choices, discuss the outcomes of such decisions, identify best practices, trace their trajectories of creation and implementation, and then assess their sustainability. We focus on Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, and Uruguay. We also highlight the case of Peru, in which best practices were introduced but failed to flourish. To contextualize these case studies, Chapter 2 provides an overview of the public security sector in Latin America, as well as the high crime context in which the police sector operates and these policing practices and reforms unfolded. We identify and examine cases in which police reform made critical advances and highlight a series of best practices that have emerged. We analyze how these best practices took root and transformed authoritarian policing practices and police–society relationships. We then assess long-term sustainability. Indeed, it is important to recognize that police behavior is far from static. As Wilson (1968) explains, the way police engage in their work can change quite rapidly. Major events can quickly erode public trust in police, as was the case in Chile in 2017, when corruption scandals quickly eroded prior widespread support for the Carabineros.

In these country case studies, some best practices have emerged that have improved police performance and strengthened police–community relationships. However, as crackdowns against protesters illustrate, in some countries there remain serious questions about the sustainability of these practices. Repression and human rights abuses often serve as policy choices during critical junctures in which civil society challenges state authority. The decision to repress undermines police trust and legitimacy and thus the sustainability of best practices. This book addresses such questions of sustainability to determine what factors can lead police reforms to backslide. We identify the challenges that have emerged to keep hard-won reforms in place and discuss implications for sustainability. In our concluding chapter we empirically test the linkage between trust in police and public support for different types of public security practices. We examine how low levels of trust in police can shape public willingness to support punitive public security measures over those prioritizing prevention.

Finally, it is important to note that most of the research for this book was conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our longitudinal analyses offer insight into durable regional and national trends; however, we recognize

that the extreme circumstances of the pandemic altered the performance of all state institutions, including the police. The pandemic also affected the linkages between state and society, in some cases culminating in political crises (e.g., Peru). As of early 2023, it is difficult to discern which pandemic-induced changes are temporary and which will endure. This book provides a comprehensive overview of key developments and trends from the 1990s through 2021; the postpandemic years will offer additional opportunities to reexamine the sustainability of police reforms against a backdrop of such an extreme public health crisis.

Notes

1. According to the Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH) and the Asociación Nicaragüense Pro-Derechos Humanos (ANPDH), approximately 300 people were killed in violent clashes with the police between April and August 2018, more than 2,000 people were injured, and more than 2,000 arrested (many in arbitrary fashion or kidnapped by security forces) (Baldizon 2018; CIDH 2018)

2. Human Rights Watch (HRW) estimated that over 11,000 Chileans were injured during police clashes with protesters between October 18 and November 22, 2020, and reported that the attorney general's office in Chile investigated 26 deaths. The Carabineros arrested more than 15,000 people, and there were widespread reports of police abuse of detainees (HRW 2019b).

3. Author interviews with leaders of community organizations and civic groups in Panama City, July 2014. Civil society groups noted that while community-oriented public security practices had taken root in urban areas, in rural zones (particularly in areas with high rates of illicit trade), policing practices were increasingly militarized, and human rights abuses continue to be prevalent.

4. For examples of the application of path dependency, see Collier and Collier (1991), Mahoney and Snyder (1999), Mahoney (2000, 2001), and Boas (2007).

5. Jackson et al. (2013) argue that police legitimacy can also shape public attitudes on the acceptability of violence. In their survey of young men from ethnic minority communities in London, they find that procedural justice is linked to police legitimacy and higher levels of police legitimacy are correlated with negative views on the use of violence. They argue that when the police are perceived as rightfully monopolizing force, their legitimacy "crowds out" the acceptability of the use of violence by other actors.

6. The degree of scandal and public outcry tend to depend quite heavily on the socioeconomic status of the victims of police violence. Fernández Roich (2017), for example describes media and public outrage when police use extensive violence against members of the middle class, in contrast to those from other socioeconomic groups.

7. For example, Mexican leaders cited police corruption and inefficiency as reasons to enlist the military in their campaign against organized crime, and El Salvador has dispatched its military to patrol the streets despite peace accords forbidding this practice. In Guatemala, paramilitary groups are linked to political and economic elites.