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Use of force and police reform in Brazil: a national survey of police officers

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This study examined self-reported use of force on the street by police officers in Brazil. The survey was conducted as part of an evaluation of a nationwide reform effort aimed at upgrading police professionalism, tightening standards for police operations, improving managerial practices, enhancing quality of life among the lower ranks, and inculcating greater respect for citizens' rights through training. Respondents were serving in 26 of the country's 27 federal states and 1938 different municipalities. The opportunity to participate was presented on the web page that they log on to routinely in order to perform administrative tasks. The frequency of self-reported use of force was driven most strongly by perceptions of a risky work environment, including both their self-assess personal risk and a general rating of the area in which they worked. Use of force was reported being used less frequently by officers who were satisfied with their careers, scored high on a personal professionalism index, supported the reform program and community policing, which was also being promoted. Women, older officers, and those with more education reported less frequent use of force.

Keywords: Brazil; police reform; use of force; risk; work environment; satisfaction; officer survey

Introduction

The role of crime and justice policies in solidifying modernizing trends in newly democratic nations is well understood by students of Latin American politics, for therein lies some of the most visible challenges to the success of democratizing forces. Especially by the end of the twentieth century, violence fueled by urbanization, inequality, small arms trafficking, and the drug trade threatens to undermine fledgling democracies that find themselves hard pressed to reform authoritarian police organizations in the face of demands that something drastic be done about crime and corrupt relationships between politicians and organized criminals (Koonings & Kruijt, 2007).

Brazil is not alone in the group of Latin American nations transitioning from authoritarianism to democracy, but its problems in doing so may be among the most noted. There is no shortage of descriptions of the violent and corrupt character of Brazilian police and their allied nonstate actors, which include private militias, paramilitary squads, and shadowy private security operations (e.g. see Perlman, 2009). There are frequent reports of torture of police prisoners and extrajudicial killings. None of this has helped the state to protect its citizens, who in urban areas face extremely high rates of violence, and the frequency with which they are killed by them has left the police one

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of the many problems facing the public, not a solution to them. One close observer of the Brazilian scene judged that, in the years since its democratizing moment in January 1984, the criminal justice sector has made the least progress toward supporting that agenda (Leeds, 2007). Although varying from place to place, police violence and corruption are endemic in too many Brazilian states, and at the same time violent crime is among the greatest impediments to social and economic development in its urban regions.

While the difficult nexus between crime, policing, and politics in emerging democracies is frequently remarked upon, much less has been written on the effectiveness of the reform efforts that have been – perhaps too sporadically – mounted.[1] This paper opens one window into police reform in Brazil, by examining the effects of police officer's experience with National Program for Public Security and Citizenship (PRONASCI), the nation's most current attempt to democratize the police.

In Brazil, policing at the street level is conducted by the federal states and not the national government. At the state level, policing services are largely provided by two distinct bodies. The civil police conduct criminal investigations and make decisions regarding prosecution, and often operate in plain clothes. Visible street policing, traffic enforcement, responses to emergency calls, and riot control are provided by the uniformed military police. They are heavily armed and organized in strict hierarchical fashion, with an elaborate military-style rank structure. They are trained and operated using traditional military tactics, and in poor areas their operations often resemble those more appropriate for a war zone.[2] Both branches of the police are characterized by cultures that stoutly resist change and outside oversight of their operations and management. PRONASCI represents an intervention into this largely local function by the national Ministry of Justice.

For the police, PRONASCI's reform agenda addresses a long list of issues, including poor management and inadequate training, bad living and working conditions for low-level police officers, and an authoritarian legacy that is inattentive to issues of human rights. The program aims at upgrading the condition of officer's lives and standards for police operations. Federal money supports training programs and better equipment. Emphasis has been placed on improving managerial practices, with the goal of improving police planning, program implementation, and local evaluation. One problem with policing in Brazil is that no one believes that they are very effective when they try to carry out standard police work. Because police are very badly paid, a housing subsidy program was instituted. Finally, a nationwide campaign began to promote community policing efforts at the municipal level. However, it is not just a police reform effort. In addition to police reform, PRONASCI aims at restructuring the Brazilian prison system, and encouraging neighborhood capacity building and community involvement in violence prevention.

This paper uses the results of a monitoring survey to examine the issue of police use of force. Why examine the views of ordinary police officers? For one, it provides a 'bottom-up' view of the use of force, listening to the voices of officers on this issue. This approach sheds some light on the apparent rationality of use of force, in the view of officers on the street. Building a more professional force is a long-term effort, for police agencies are human services organizations. The levers for change in policing are recruitment, training, supervision, and discipline; these constitute most of the tools available to any reform effort aiming to upgrade the effectiveness and professionalism of the police. This makes it a slow process – police officers start young and their careers unfold vertically within the organization, so agencies will change more glacially

than reformers would hope under the best of circumstances. But in the end, the public will see the consequences of reform only in the quality of service delivered by officers on the street, so understanding where they stand is an important step in the monitoring process. Surveys of police officers and other security personnel constitute just one of a series of monitoring mechanisms which have been set up to evaluate PRONASCI, but the surveys constitute one of the few views 'from the bottom up' as the reform process.

The data

The survey was conducted in 2008, using the Internet. Recipients of Ministry of Justice educational grants for security personnel were invited to the survey web page when they logged on to perform routine required administrative tasks. The survey was developed and managed independently by Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV), a university in Rio de Janeiro, and the responses of the participants remained confidential.

The survey involved a broad spectrum of security personnel in Brazil, including employees in the correctional system, firefighters, and forensic examiners, as PRONASCI involved distinctive programs for each group. However, this analysis examines only the responses of members of the civil and military police, the two state-based groups that patrol the streets and conduct criminal investigations. Only low-level personnel were included in the survey; members of the better-educated and better-paid senior officers' corps enter the higher ranks of these organizations laterally, and they were not involved in the educational or housing grants programs. In total, 17,341 respondents are examined here. The data are national in scope, including respondents from 26 of the country's 27 federal states and 1938 different municipalities. The absence of systematic national records made it impossible to estimate a response rate for the survey, and there are no data with which to benchmark the personal demographics of respondents. This reflects the fact that policing is a state rather than a federal responsibility in Brazil. National data on many other topics are frequently nonexistent as well. For example, there are no national (and frequently local) sources of crime data to match to the 1900-plus jurisdictions with participating survey respondents, and Brazilian census data were in practice unmatchable with these boundaries.

Use of force on the street

The dependent variable, self-reported use of force, was measured by responses to the question 'How often is the use of force necessary in your work?' Respondents were divided on this with 9% reporting force was necessary 'very often' and 34% 'often.' On the other hand, 48% reported use of force was necessary only 'occasionally' and 9% 'rarely.' This question was included to gage the general 'style' with which officers perform their duties. Note that almost half of officers reported fairly frequent use of force.

Impact of the risk environment

Studies in the northern hemisphere of the correlates of police use of force stress the significant role played by the risks that police officers believe they face on the job. Real or not, typing neighborhoods as troublesome leads police officers to stereotype residents as uncooperative, hostile, or crime-prone – resulting in a tendency to approach residents with suspicion, to behave more aggressively, and to act more punitively than they do in

other kinds of neighborhoods (Terrill & Reisig, 2003). Studies based on police records and field observations indicate that police verbal and physical abuse, unjustified street stops, and corruption are more prevalent in disadvantaged and high-crime areas (Fagan & Davies, 2000; Kane, 2002; Mastrofski, Reisig, & McCluskey, 2002; Terrill & Reisig, 2003).

In this study, officer's perceptions of the risk environment were measured by responses to two questions: 'What is the level of risk in your work?' and 'How do you evaluate the public security situation where you work?' They rated their personal risks on a scale ranging from 'average' to 'very high,' and the general security situation in their community from 'critical – difficult to keep order' to 'within the normal limits and tranquil.'

Both measures prove to be independently related to reports of the use of force by Brazilian police. Figure 1 presents the percentages of respondents reporting that use of force was necessary 'often' and 'very often' when classified by the extent of perceived risk in the areas where they worked. Reported use of force rose with risk, ranging from an average of 7% in the lowest-rates areas to 54% in more threatening places. As an additional analytic tool, Figure 1 also presents the percentage of officers who fell in each risk category. As it indicates, 63% of officers believed the level of risk in their work to be very high, and among that large group (54%) reported that force was necessary in their work. The effect of the sharp risk-force gradient was thus multiplied by the large proportion of officers who saw themselves at high risk.

These police officers were somewhat more positive about the general security situation – only 12% rated it as 'critical', the highest category. But this perception too was strongly linked to the perceived necessity of using force on the job, with more than 60% of officers in the 'critical' category reporting resorting to use of force. In multivariate analyses, both factors were among the most important determinants of assessments of the role of use of force in policing.
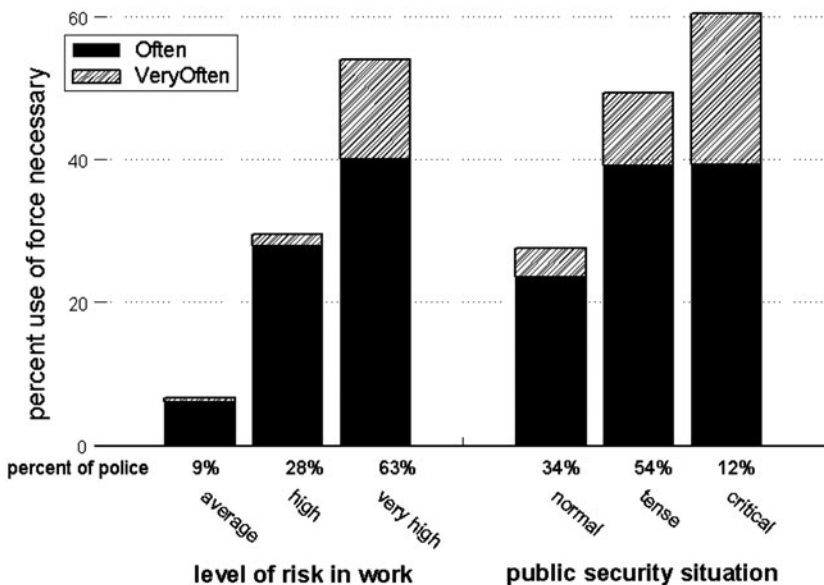

Figure 1.   Perceived risk and use of force.
Source: PRONASCI officer survey.

Impact of personal background factors

Because our respondents share a common background – all are working police officers – they are divided by fewer social cleavages than is the general population. However, several social background factors still played a role in shaping reports of the necessity to use force on the street. These included gender, age, education, and seniority, with the last two being more important after other factors are accounted for.

The strongest of these personal factors is gender. Studies of police behavior in the Northern hemisphere typically find few gender differences in the extent to which police are involved in the use of force. For example, Paoline and Terrill (2004) found rates of both verbal and physical use of force did not differ by gender, and that other individual-level correlates of use of force did not vary by gender. Gender differences were very strong in Brazil, on the other hand, as is illustrated in Figure 2. Gender was the strongest nonrisk measure in the model. However, because only 11% of police officers are female (this is also reported in Figure 2), gender can play only a limited role in shaping police conduct in the aggregate.

Similarly, studies of police behavior in the northern hemisphere find that younger officers are more likely to employ use of force as an on-street tactic for controlling risk, perhaps because they lack experience with more indirect but still effective personal risk-management strategies. Harris (2011) summary of this research in the USA notes that officers get in trouble early in their careers, but involvement in on-street violence declines with experience. In Brazil, many police officers are relatively young – as illustrated in Figure 2 and 40% are age 30 or younger – and many of them are thus in their high risk years. The perceived necessity of force declined with age, but relatively few police officers are found in older categories. In this national study, only 12% of officers were over age 40 and a big majority were under age 30.
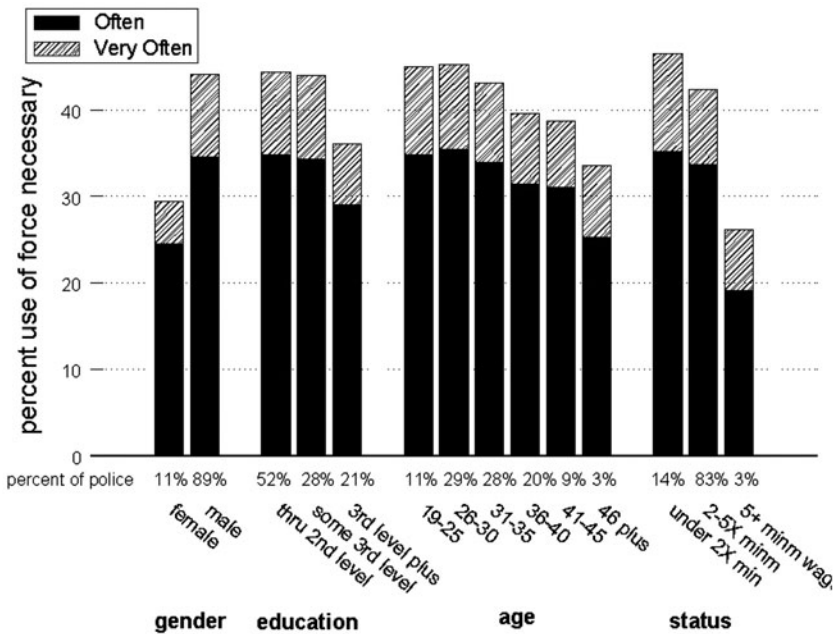

Figure 2.   Personal factors and use of force.
Source: PRONASCI officer survey.

The other groups that report less necessity in relying on force are the most educated and highly paid police officers in the sample. Both of these factors reflect their standing in the organization. There does not seem to be any North American research on income differentials, but research has consistently demonstrated that more educated officers generally perform better and are less likely to be subjects of citizen complaints. This is, in fact, about the only consistent correlate in research on officer behavior and education (Rydberg & Terrill, 2010). In Brazil, the officer corps enters policing via lateral entry, and they were not included in this study. Income, therefore, reflects the rank and seniority of the rank-and-file police officers who were surveyed, and the variation in education is likewise not linked to the higher educational attainment of persons recruited directly into the higher reaches of the organization.

On the other hand, race did not enter into this picture at all. As a result, it is not presented in Figure 2. In this survey, about 42% of police officers were white, 46% of multiracial heritage, and 10% self-identified as black. None of these distinctions were related to views of the use of force, however. Likewise, whether or not officers lived in the communities in which they worked made no difference in their views. In total, 68% of those interviewed did live and work in the same area, but this was unrelated to reports of the necessity of using force.

Upgrading the professionalism of the police

One of the key reasons for conducting this survey was to monitor police reactions to the professionalizing efforts of PRONASCI. As discussed above, the Justice Ministry's police reform agenda involved upgrading the condition of police officers and standards for operations.
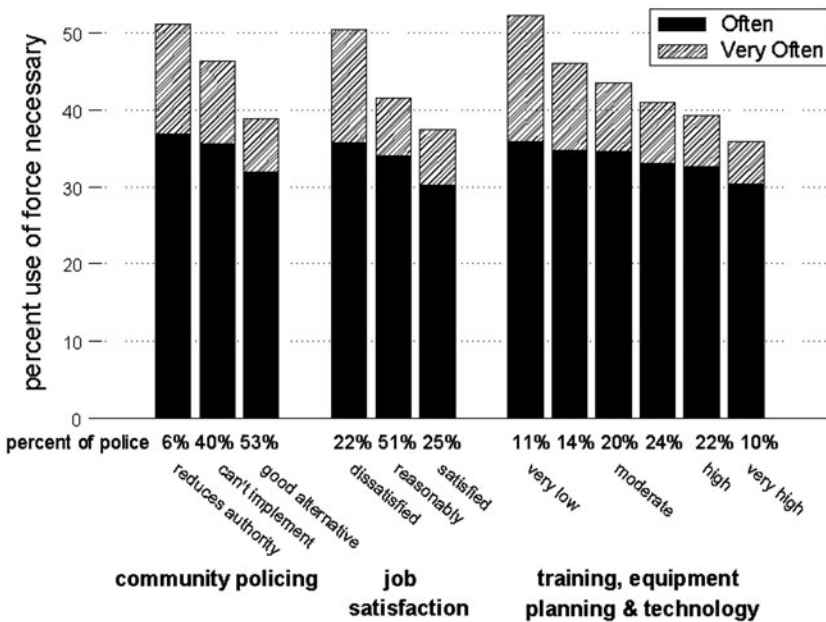

Figure 3.   Professionalism and use of force.
Source: PRONASCI officer survey.

Officer's assessments of several of these professionalizing efforts were measured by a single index combining positive responses to a series of questions about training, equipment, and planning. Those who scored highly rated the police academy training that they received as of good or reasonable quality and as reasonably or very useful. Officers also scored more highly if they had attended several in-service training courses in the past year. High scorers also rated the equipment they were issued as of good or very good quality, if they gave their own computer skills a high rating, and if they thought the planning and evaluation efforts of their agency were good or very good.

Figure 3 illustrates, police officers were divided on these points, with almost as many concentrated at the lower end of the scale (the three left-hand bars) as at the right-hand side, where officers who were more favorably disposed to the program were concentrated. As the Figure also indicates the view that the use of force was necessary in their work declined with reports of improvements in training, equipment, and management. More than 50% of officers in the low-professionalism category ranked high on use of force, while the comparable figure was 36% among those at the upper end of the scale.

A key component of this effort to reform the police was its emphasis on community policing. What this concept meant on the ground was not always clear, and many states were uncertain about how to implement such a project, but few of the police officers interviewed (just 6%) were unfamiliar with the concept. They were asked, 'How would you evaluate Community Policing in Brazil?' The response categories were varied, but overall 53% of those interviewed were positive, responding that 'it is a very good alternative strategy for police in Brazil since it involves community interaction.' About 40% were dubious, responding that 'it cannot be implemented everywhere, since some areas, such as favelas, are communities dominated by drug gangs.' Another, 6% thought that community policing 'reduces the authority of the police, but it may have a palliative effect.' As Figure 3 illustrates, there was about a 10 percentage point difference between the most supportive police officers and those who thought community policing would undermine their authority, when it came to reports of the necessity of using force on the street.

Finally, a measure of the influence of the professionalizing thrust of PRONASCI would be increased job satisfaction. These have been shown to be related to features of police work that officers care about, including wages and benefits, quality of equipment, training, and supervision. To measure this, respondents were asked 'How do you evaluate your satisfaction with your professional career?' They rated themselves from 'satisfied' to 'dissatisfied,' with a middle category, 'reasonably' satisfied. As Figure 3 documents, the better they felt about their careers as police officers, the less likely they were to feel that use of force was necessary in their work, from top to bottom by about 18 percentage points.

Police views of some components of the program proved to be unrelated to their views of the use of force. In particular, participation in the national housing subsidy program for police officers did not seem to influence their thinking about their work. The program is intended to improve the live condition of poorly paid officers, but based on the survey only 9% of them were participating. They gave the program a high ranking – on a '0–10' rating scale 81% rated it an 'eight' or above – but too few reported participating for it to have much effect on opinion.

There was also no direct effect of police officer's views of the extent of corruption. Many see police corruption and violence reinforcing one another, for corruption causes them to draw closed 'the blue curtain' that shields police operations from public

scrutiny. When asked about the extent of police corruption only 0.4% of those surveyed maintained that it was 'no problem.' Otherwise, the issue was one of how widespread they thought it was. Most police officers maintained that corruption is a problem of individual officers (69%) rather than 'widespread' (24%) or occurring in specific units (7%). Their analyses of the corruption problem were unrelated to their views of the necessity of using force, however.

Perspectives on crime and policing

In addition, several measures of attitudes – the perspectives of these police officers on crime and their role in society – were related to their views of the use of force, albeit more weakly. Officers were more likely to report frequent use of force when they thought that public security issues were the most important agenda item, more important than 'other national questions, such as employment, education and health.' On the other hand, police who were supportive of PRONASCI's push for sentencing reform were less likely to think that force was necessary in their work; they responded positively to the question, 'Are you in favor of swapping of sentences for non-serious crimes for study or community work?'

Other social attitudes proved to be largely unrelated to police officer's views of the use of force. One opinion in particular was whether they thought society trusted the police. Building trust between police and the community is one of the major goals of PRONASCI. On the public side of the equation, FVG is monitoring opinion through surveys they are conducting in poor housing areas (favelas) throughout the country (see Riccio, Ruediger, Ross, & Skogan, 2013, this volume). Those results are at best mixed, and the skepticism of poor Brazilians regarding the police is mirrored on the police side. In this survey, only 8% of officers believed the public thought them trustworthy and effective, a very low number.

Table 1.   Multivariate analysis of perceived necessity of using force.

	Use of force necessary		
	B	*t*	Sig
Risky at work	0.31	42.45	0.00
Security situation critical	0.16	21.54	0.00
Female	−0.07	−9.25	0.00
Age	−0.04	−5.25	0.00
Education	−0.05	−6.41	0.00
Monthly income category	−0.03	−4.07	0.00
Support community policing	−0.04	−4.89	0.00
Career satisfaction	−0.03	−3.33	0.00
Professionalism index	−0.03	−3.67	0.00
Support community service	−0.04	−6.06	0.00
Public security most important	0.04	4.99	0.00
Constant		24.25	0.00
R .432; R^2 .186			
No. of obs. 16,616			

Notes: B = standardized regression coefficients, t = *t*-statistic, sig = significance level.
Source: PRONASCI officer survey.

Multivariate analysis

Table 1 presents the results of an analysis of the joint influence of all of these variables on officers' assessments of the necessity of using force on the street. The standardized regression coefficients indicate the relative importance of each of the measures. They are ordered in line with the discussion of variables in this article.

First, it is clear that officer's assessments of the risks in their environment predominate. Both their own perceived risk on the job and their assessments of security in general in the communities in which they work were strongly and significantly linked to reports of the frequency of use of force. Of the two, the risks they personally face predominate. Any assessment of police behavior must begin with their perceptions of danger, a specter that pervades their lives.

Following risk in importance are three personal factors, gender, age, and education. Controlling for other factors, female officers reported using force less frequently. So too did officers with more experience and those with higher levels of education. Rank-and-file officers from somewhat higher income households (but by and large low-ranking police officers in Brazil live in modest circumstances) also were less likely to report using force.

The survey also assessed respondent's involvement in and assessments of the elements of the PRONASCI reform that were likely to affect them. A multi-item professionalism index reflecting their participation in training programs, skill at using technology, and other program-related efforts was among the factors that were significantly related to lower levels of self-reported use of force. Officers who were more satisfied with their careers were similarly inclined. Measures of police views of PRONASCI's reform agenda follow, and remain independently statistically significant. These were support for community policing and support for sentencing reform. In addition, net of other factors, officers were more likely to report frequent use of force when they thought that public security issues were the most important national agenda item.

Conclusion

This nationwide study conducted was conducted in the midst of a large-scale police reform effort. It highlights the importance of many components of that effort, which in the survey were linked to reports of less frequent use of force. Consistent with decades of police research, the frequency of self-reported use of force was driven most strongly by perceptions of a risky work environment. Both measures included here proved important, one a self-assessment of respondent's personal risk and the other a general rating of riskiness the area in which they worked.

Controlling for other factors, personal factors were also linked to self-reports of use of force. In the survey, women, older officers, and those with more education reported using force less frequently. So did those whose households were making a little more money. However, most Brazilian officers were young, male, ill-educated and poorly paid – when taken together, a recipe for trouble.

Most importantly for the purpose of the survey, which was to help evaluate the reform effort, use of force was reported being used less frequently by officers who had contact with or supported key components of the program. An index of their personal professionalism based on their participation and assessments of training, skill in using equipment, and their views of the planning and evaluation efforts of their agency was independently linked to less frequent self-reported use of force. So

was their general career satisfaction. Attitudes were also important. Officers who supported the reform program and community policing, which was also being promoted, were also less often involved in the use of force. On the other hand, officers who thought that crime fighting was the most important issue on the national agenda were more likely to report use of force. Overall, few of those we surveyed were sanguine about their status in society. In the survey, only 8% believed the public thought of them as trustworthy and effective.

Reform policing in Brazil is, of course, a monumental task. The impediments to reform are legion, but they would be familiar to any police researcher. They include an insular police culture confident of its ability to avoid external scrutiny; organized resistance to change by police unions and associations representing the officer corps; the reform-quashing effect of law-and-order political rhetoric in the face of high levels of violent crime; the close relationship between police and rural oligarchs; frequent turnover among police executives and their overseers; politicians' aversion to seeming to take responsibility for crime rates; tight links between politicians and police; and the corrosive effect of police and political corruption, which creates 'dirty secrets' that both must conspire to keep hidden (Leeds, 2007). Police in Brazil remain widely mistrusted, in part because they carry the legacy of the country's authoritarian past, both reputationally and in terms of their political conduct. Rank and file officers have little education, and their rough and unsophisticated training emphasizes military conduct, discipline, and values. Street-level policing is conducted by the military police, who operate best with heavy weaponry. They support a society characterized by one of the most unequal distributions of wealth in the modern world, and they have traditionally done so with disrespect for the rights of the poorer classes.

One vision at its launch was that PRONASCI would strengthen the capacity of criminal justice institutions as part of a larger agenda, that of building trust and confidence between society and the state more generally. But, as the articles in this volume by Marco Ruediger (2013, this volume) and Vicente Riccio, Marcio de Miranda, and Algelica Mueller (2013, this volume) indicate, reform at the national level faltered after several years. Its legacy can still be seen here and there, at the state and local level, but policing in Brazil seemingly proved too daunting a reform project.

Notes

1. For an exception, see da Silva and Cano (2007).
2. In urban areas, traffic control and other similar functions is also performed by an expanding Guardas Municipais, whose officers are sometimes armed but largely conduct 'preventive" patrolling operations.

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