

Improving Police Effectiveness Longer Tenure and Better Training are Key

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Surveys based on household interviews, rather than official statistics, give a far more accurate picture of crime trends and allow for better estimates of the efficacy of police reforms. Longer tenures and more training in scientific investigation techniques and communication skills are effective in increasing police effectiveness.

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Field Partners: Rajasthan Police



Policy Issue

Professional policing promotes the rule of law, supports economic growth and improves the lives of the poor by protecting them from crime. In India, the police are often perceived as corrupt, ineffective and brutal, while police officers themselves report feeling unsatisfied, overworked, and manipulated by local political forces. But because of systemic, organizational and behavioral challenges, police reform is extremely difficult and rarely prioritized.

Several national level police reform initiatives have been undertaken, usually in the form of commissions. Often these have been too broad in their scope and have lacked proper implementation. Many local reform initiatives have also been carried out, but were never rigorously evaluated. Rajasthan Police has therefore sought a middle ground where reforms could be implemented and evaluated at the state level to gather objective information about police performance and deliver results within a relatively short amount of time.

Context

The state of Rajasthan, with approximately 70 million people, has 747 police stations. The strength of police personnel is approximately 78,000. These police stations are headed by officers called Station House Officers (SHOs) usually of the ranks of Inspectors and Sub-Inspectors (in small police stations). They are in charge of overall management of policing in their jurisdictions, including duty allocation. There was significant

resistance to change among these SHOs, for a number of reasons. Firstly, because reforms specified guidelines for duty schedules and days off, it was perceived as eroding their authority. Moreover, adhering to these new guidelines created more work for the SHOs, who had no incentive to comply. External authorities, who are often able to incentivize police officers with threats of transfers to undesirable postings, also perceived few benefits from changing the status quo.

Description of Intervention

The Rajasthan Police, in collaboration with J-PAL researchers, began by selecting a set of interventions which were low cost, capable of generating hard evidence of their impact, and which could be scaled-up across the state. These were piloted in 11 police stations across three districts, and on the basis of preliminary results, four interventions were selected for the final roll out.

Stability of Tenure: All administrative transfers were frozen for the duration of the study, except those based on complaints of misconduct or for staff with more than two years at a given posting. Without the threat of transfer hanging over them, police would be better able to resist manipulation by external authorities, and would also be able to improve their familiarity with the community and area. Presumably this would enable them to police better.

Roster of Duties, Weekly Days Off: Staff at the police stations often worked 24x7, which adversely affected both their efficiency at work and job

satisfaction. Staff also often complained of favoritism by SHOs, who were apt to assign certain duties perceived as lucrative to favorites, thereby causing further dissatisfaction. This intervention sought to create a transparent duty roster with a prefixed weekly day off, thereby enabling the entire staff to get all types of jobs in the police stations along with a weekly rest.

Community Observers: To encourage citizens to visit police stations and gain greater familiarity, a community observers program was introduced. Community volunteers were selected to visit the police station for 3 hours every day. Women were encouraged to participate by allowing pairs rather than individuals. These observers could help with police work, as well as writing comments in the police station register or the drop box.

Training: Two different types of training were given: First, investigation officers were given a week-long training session on scientific techniques of investigation at the Rajasthan Police Academy. Second, all staff were trained on “soft skills” such as communication, meditation, stress management, attitude change and other personality development skills that facilitated community interaction. To observe whether it was necessary to train an entire police station staff or if a few ‘change agents’ could have the desired impact, the proportion of officers in a police station who received training was randomized.

Results

A household survey of crime and police and public perception was undertaken to determine the baseline, using individual interviews rather than official statistics. This survey, the first of its kind in India, revealed significant under-reporting of crimes for a variety of reasons: often, people did not perceive crimes as important enough to report, or they thought that the police were unable or unwilling to take action. Of those who did report crimes, 46% reported being unsatisfied with police actions. Furthermore, when researchers made decoy visits to police stations to try to report crimes, only 40% of the false complaints were recorded.

Community Observers and Weekly Days Off: The interventions utilizing community observers and giving weekly days off suffered significant implementation problems, limiting their efficacy.

Since SHOs themselves did not receive days off, they lacked interest in the implementation. Further violent agitation (Gujjar Agitation) and a terror blast at Jaipur during the time of the study were major road blocks. There was also doubt about whether community observers were actually visiting police stations, since the forms to indicate their presence were often filled out by the police staff themselves. Perhaps because of these challenges in implementation, no significant effects on police or public satisfaction were observed from these interventions.

Stability of Tenure: In police stations where transfers were restricted, people’s satisfaction with the police increased by 30% and fear of the police decreased significantly, despite the fact that transfers were never fully frozen. This increase in satisfaction is probably because of improved familiarity of the staff with the area and community. Also with no threat of transfer hanging over their heads, police station staff could deliver more efficiently.

Training: Both types of training—investigation and soft skills—had significant positive effects on the quality of police work and public satisfaction, but no trickle down effect was observed, i.e. the increase in satisfaction was proportional to the number of trainees within a police station. In police stations where all staff were trained, victim satisfaction increased by 30%, while fear of the police was reduced by 17%. Investigation quality of trained police officers was also improved.

On the basis of this research, the combined team of researchers and policymakers have three strong recommendations: (1) Independent surveys should be conducted to get an accurate status of crime, (2) The tenure of police station staff should be made stable and (3) Police officers should receive regular training on investigation tactics and ‘soft skills’.

Additional Readings:

(available on www.povertyactionlab.org)

Abhijit Banerjee, Raghavendra Chattopadhyay, Esther Duflo, Daniel Keniston: “Rajasthan Police Performance and Perception Intervention.” *Working Paper*, May 2009.