Does Policing Have an Impact on Homicides?

Maurice Cusson[A]

Traditional police sociology has shown little interest in the police's relationship with crime rates. Sociologists have acted as if police and crime were two separate planets with no connections between them. These sociologists have studied police culture and the use of force by law enforcement officers, but it has never occurred to them to ask: What works in terms of policing? Only with Sherman's research did the question "What works?" start to be asked and answered with statistics (Sherman and Berk 1984). Since then, research on the effectiveness of policing has increased. And we now know better what works to reduce crime, and what does not, as well as why (see the assessments by Sherman and Eck 2002; Braga and Weisburd 2010; Cusson 2010; Blais and Cusson 2008; Sherman 2013).

In this article, I will review the current state of knowledge related to the impact of policing on homicide rates. These rates are a good indicator of the ability of police organizations to have an effect on violent crime. Homicide is the most serious and most statistically measured of all crimes. Its different forms generally occur in tandem with other serious crimes, such as armed robbery.

Most researchers who have studied the effectiveness of policing have limited their research to a single country (most often the United States) and over a relatively brief period. Their results are not always conclusive because they lack a way to measure the quality of policing and because the variations are not significant enough both in terms of homicide rates and the variables of policing. It is therefore important for researchers to broaden their horizons to see what is happening in several countries and over several time periods. The variations in policing and in homicides can thus become much more significant.

The present article will answer to the question posed in the title in four parts:

- The first part will present the results of a transcultural comparative analysis that relates an indicator of police performance measured in 77 countries with the corresponding homicide rates.
- The second examines the main results of research into the remarkable decline in homicide rates in New York following the well-known reorganization of the New York City Police Department (NYPD).

[A] International Centre for Comparative Criminology, University of Montreal

[1] On this crisis see (in French) Jean-François Gayraud, "*Crises Financières: la Dimension Criminelle*" (Financial Crises, the Criminal Dimension), *Défense Nationale et Sécurité Collective*, December 2008; Jean-François Gayraud, "*La Dimension Criminelle de la Crise des Subprimes*" (The Criminal Dimension in the Subprime Crisis), *Diplomatie*, Special Edition No. 8, April–May 2009 and (in English) Kitty Calavita, Henry N. Pontell, and Robert H. Tillman, "*Big Money Crime, Fraud and Politics in the Savings and Loan Crisis*", University of California Press, 1997.

[2] On this crisis see Jean-François Gayraud, "*Le Monde des Mafias, Géopolitique du Crime Organisé*" (The Mafia World, Geopolitics of Organized Crime) (Odile Jacob, 2005 and 2008); Jean-François Gayraud, Crises Financières: *la Dimension Criminelle* (Financial Crises, the Criminal Dimension), *Défense Nationale et Sécurité Collective*, December 2008.

- The third part will look back in history to ask: What effect did the establishment of two major police organizations, in Paris in the seventeenth century and in London in the nineteenth century, have on homicides?
- The fourth and final part will list the reasons for the failure of policing and the conditions that can make it effective.

I - Global Homicide Rates Vary in Inverse Proportion to Police Performance

Working with the "World Homicide Survey" team, Paul-Philippe Paré (2013) wanted to know if homicide rates were related to a police performance indicator inspired by the Van Dijk indicator (2008). He examined the homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants for the years 1998 to 2002 (data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)). The indicator measuring police performance was drawn from the responses obtained from international surveys of victimization and other surveys of corruption on the perception of the police, and on the percentages of crimes reported to the police by victims. Responses to five questions were combined to create this indicator of police performance:

1. Corruption: Do police officers in the country ask citizens for bribes?
2. Public satisfaction: "Are you satisfied with the way your local police force does its job?"
3. Victim satisfaction is measured using the same question.
4. Police reliability: "To what extent do you trust your police service to enforce the law?"
5. Percentages of crimes reported to the police by victims, a sign that people trust the police.

Indicators of underdevelopment are known to correlate closely with homicide rates in the world. For this reason, Paul-Philippe Paré used a United Nations indicator of socioeconomic development in his analyses, using the median income of citizens adjusted to the price of goods and services, life-expectancy, and access to education.

First observation: the five elements that make up the indicator of police performance are in correlation with each other and with homicide rates, with strong correlations from 0.59 to 0.74. Second observation: a multiple regression analysis that includes the indicator of socioeconomic development in the model shows that police performance presents a significant explained variance of 0.52 and the indicator of socioeconomic development ceases to reach the level of significance.

The correlations and regression analysis confirm the hypothesis that the police can reduce homicides if they are honest and gain the trust of citizens. When citizens have a favorable attitude towards the police, they are more inclined to call 911 when they are the victim of a crime and to cooperate with the police. As a result, police officers receive regular information from victims and the general public about crime rates. And clearance rates will also tend to be high, which has a deterrent effect on individuals who might consider killing someone.

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[3] On this transition see Joseph Stiglitz, "*Quand le Capitalisme Perd la Tête*" (When Capitalism Loses its Head) (Fayard 2003); Joseph Stiglitz, *La Grande Désillusion* (Globalization and its Discontents) (Fayard 2002).

II - New York's "Success Story" Can Be Explained by the NYPD's New Strategy

In terms of police effectiveness, one of the most remarkable and most analyzed evolutions is the significant drop in crime rates in New York during the 1990s and 2000s. During this period, the rates of robbery, breaking and entering, rape, and homicide dropped by almost 80%. In 1990, homicide rates in the city were at 30.7 per 100,000 inhabitants; in 2009, they had fallen to six per 100,000 inhabitants. It is also true that crime rates dropped in the United States and in Canada over the same period. Be that as it may, New York City is distinct in having a drop in crime rates that was twice as great as other American cities (Zimring 2012, 5, 16, 29, 36; Zimring 2006).

The leading criminologists who have studied the drop in crime in New York attribute it to the reorganization of the city's police force under the impetus of its chief, Bratton, who took office in 1994. The new commissioner entered his post with the goal of fighting crime, a priority that was taken all the more seriously because both Giuliani, the mayor of New York, and Bratton agreed it was possible to reduce crime rates despite structural factors. The new commissioner put in place a style of leadership that gave responsibility to the commanders of local precincts. During meetings where the criminal problems of each precinct of the city were examined with the aid of the CompStat system—which allowed for real-time representation of movements in crime rates and their distribution—very precise targets were identified. Performances were evaluated and police officers who dragged their feet were demoted. Crime hot spots in the city were identified and studied (Silverman 1999).

Several studies have demonstrated that improved police performance was at the origin of the drop in crime rates in New York. Zimring (2006 and 2012), after eliminating all other hypotheses for the drop in crime rates, related it to five police improvements: 1) vigorous police action against crime hot spots and drug markets; 2) "aggressive" policing; 3) the questioning and frisking of suspects caught for disorderly conduct or minor offences, which led to disarming criminals who carried firearms; 4) the increase in the size of the police force; and 5) the implementation of CompStat (a system for the rapid analysis and visualization of the distribution of criminal activity in time and space).

Besides Zimring, two teams of criminologists attempted to answer the following question with the help of statistics: Have police operations against disorders reduced crime rates in New York? Rosenfeld et al. (2007) established that, all things being equal, the more penalties for disorders increased in a precinct of a city, between 1998 and 2000, the more homicides and robberies tended to decline. For their part, Messner and his colleagues (2007) were able to obtain data broken down for 74 precincts of the city for the years ranging from 1990 to

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[4] On this crisis see a number of articles by Jean-François Gayraud: "*La Dimension Criminelle de la Crise des Subprimes* (The Criminal Dimension of the Subprime Crisis), *Diplomatie*, Special Edition No. 8, April–May 2009; "*Crises Financières: la Dimension Criminelle Un An Après*" (Financial Crises, the Criminal Dimension One year On), *Défense Nationale et Sécurité Collective,* December 2009; "*Capitalisme Criminel: Subprimes ou Subcrimes?*" (Criminal Capitalism: Subprime or Subcrime?), Cité, No. 41, PUF, March 2010.

[5] See Noël Pons, "*La Crise des Subprimes: une Aubaine pour les Criminalités?*" (Subprime Crisis: A Bonanza for Criminals), Cahiers de la Sécurité, No. 7, January–March 2009.

1999. Their analysis of the changes in each of the variables examined year by year and neighborhood by neighborhood showed that the increase in the number of penalties for disorders reduced the number of robberies and homicides committed with a firearm, but had no influence on homicides without firearms.

How did the strategy implemented by Bratton have an impact on homicides? First, by disarming armed robbers, dealers, and other criminals, they then committed many fewer murders during robberies, arguments, or fights. Second, targeted police operations disrupted criminal networks. Third, heightened pressure from increased police checks probably led many delinquents to abandon their criminal career or at least commit fewer misdemeanors and crimes.

III - Between the Seventeenth and Nineteenth Centuries, the Emergence of Strong Police Organizations Was Followed by a Drop in Homicides

It is now common knowledge that homicide rates decreased considerably in Europe between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries. The sizeable volume of work by historians and criminologists has established that homicide rates in medieval Europe were at the level of 40 per 100,000 inhabitants, while in Western Europe today it is between one and three per 100,000 inhabitants (Eisner 2003). This progress towards nonviolence has been explained in very broad terms as the civilizing process, the monopolization of violence by the state, the progress of the rule of law, the development of self-control, the rise of humanitarianism, the pacification of conflicts by municipal authorities, the progress of reason and the

Enlightenment, and the criminalization of violence (Elias 1939a and b; Eisner 2003; Muchembled 2008; Spierenburg 2008; Pinker 2011). Unfortunately, these explanations remain at a very abstract level and say little about the way that social actors had a concrete impact on reductions in violence and what institutions contributed to this pacification of manners. Two important moments in the history of European policing, however, give us reason to believe that this reduction in homicides is, at least in part, due to progress in policing.

Thus, the creation in 1667 of the police lieutenancy in Paris under Louis XIV can be seen as a major moment in the modernization of the police and its establishment as a strong institution distinct from the judicial system. Before that time, the sergeants of cities and other personnel responsible for enforcing judicial decisions were few in number, often corruptible, and unable to arrest notorious criminals because power relationships were not in their favor. As soon as the police lieutenancy was put in place, the agents and commissioners of this organization had sufficient numbers and were organized enough to intervene in brawls, prevent criminal behavior (in particular by lighting the streets of Paris), organize an effective information system, and arrest any group of criminals (Saint-Germain 1962; Lebigre 1993 and 2005).

After 1667, the policing model established in Paris spread to the other major cities in France. It is certainly not by chance that homicide rates in France in the eighteenth century were much lower than during the preceding centuries: approximately two per 100,000 inhabitants in the few regions of France for which records were kept (Nassiet 2011, 298).

In England, the policing situation before the nineteenth century was not very different from the situation in France before

1667. There were few constables, they lacked the backing of a strong hierarchy, and they were easily corrupted and often intimidated by determined criminals. The history of the creation of the Metropolitan Police of London in 1829 is well documented. It was a new organization of police officers with better pay and independent of judicial authority. The instructions given to this new police stipulated that its goal was first and foremost prevention. The new constables wore a uniform; they were required to act in a civil manner; they did not carry firearms; and they were sparing in their use of force. Discipline was rigorous and officers were supported by the organization. Over time, these police officers, very present in places where brawls could occur, were accepted by the public (Reith 1952 and 1956; Critchley 1972; Emsley 1983, 1991, and 2005; Rawling 2003). The policing model established in London quickly spread to the rest of England. It is not without interest to note that after this new police was put in place and spread to the rest of the country, crime rates, including homicide rates, recorded a very significant drop (which is very well documented by Gatrell 1980).

IV - Explaining the Successes and Failures of Policing

The research mentioned above demonstrates that police officers who enjoy good standing with the public are successful in reducing homicide rates in some countries and during certain periods, while at other times and in different countries, police with low approval ratings fail at keeping the peace and security. We have also learned that in New York, before the 1990s, the police were being powerless, which led to higher levels of violence. Then, with the reorganization of the NYPD, homicide rates dropped under the pressure of proactive policing. Finally, I asserted that the establishment of the police lieutenancy in Paris during the seventeenth century and, two centuries later, the Metropolitan Police of London were followed by reductions in homicide rates. The reasons for police failures as well as the conditions for police effectiveness can both be identified by taking these results into account as well as other recent discoveries on the subject (Sherman and Eck 2002; Cusson 2010; Braga and Weisburd 2010; and Sherman 2013).

In the following section, I will examine how policing success in dealing with homicides and crime rates in general requires a response to four major problems that the police have faced in past centuries and that they still face today in many countries around the world: 1) police corruption and public distrust of the police; 2) intimidation suffered by the police; 3) the routine passivity of police officers and their hierarchy; and, 4) police resources spread too thin.

1) From Corrupt Police to Intelligence-led Policing

We have seen how Paré's analysis (2013) of the *World Homicide Survey* data established that countries with high homicide rates tend to suffer from police corruption and public dissatisfaction, which leads people to report fewer of the crimes of which they are victim to the police. It is common knowledge that, before 1990, the New York police were rocked by several scandals that called the integrity of NYPD officers into question (Silverman 1999, 31-62). Finally, French and English historians have often mentioned the corruptibility of city sergeants in France and constables in England in the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, periods that were characterized by their high numbers of homicides.

It is easy to see how corruption correlates to homicide rates. Police officers who spend their time collecting bribes have little time left for fighting crime; they are disdained by citizens who refuse to call on their services, give them information, or cooperate with them. Corrupt police officers cut themselves off from the community. This can be seen in countries like Colombia and Mexico: victims refrain from calling the police, saying that nothing can be expected from them and that they risk being extorted (Gomez del Prado and Cusson 2012). On the opposite end of the spectrum, in a safe country like Japan where the homicide rates are very low, the police have a symbiotic relationship with the community. We know that in this country, small neighborhood police stations (Koban) are spread throughout all sectors of the city and encourage communication with citizens. Police officers are respected; they have excellent relationships with the public, which voluntarily provides any information requested (Bayley 1991; Parker 2001; Uranaka 2010; Uranaka and Cusson 2012).

The exchange of information between police and citizens can be seen as the first step in "Intelligence-led Policing." In fact, the first source of police information remains the information provided by victims, their family and friends, and informants. One of the conditions for this exchange of information is a climate of mutual trust between police and citizens.

In the case of murder, police officers who are in constant contact with the public will have a better chance of receiving useful information to arrest the guilty party. In the case of brawls or if an individual makes serious death threats, a police force that is seen in a positive light by the public will be called in and can put a stop to the violence or neutralize the dangerous individuals.

2) Who Fears Whom?

History tells us that during periods marked by high homicide rates, city sergeants and constables were in a weak position compared with criminal groups. Thus in Paris before 1667 and in London before 1829, sergeants and constables were few in number, often worked alone, and were not part of a powerful organization. When confronted by a determined criminal group, they were forced to retreat. Moreover, they did not possess enough force to arrest armed and recalcitrant criminals (Lee 1901; Gonthier 1993; Beattie 2001; Gauvard 2005). At the time, the entire repressive apparatus lacked the means to overcome criminal elements. The magistrates were also the object of threats and did not dare pass judgment against criminals protected by powerful men. Still today, in several countries in South America and Sub-Saharan Africa, police officers, judges, and prison authorities have neither the means nor the force necessary to impose themselves on determined and armed criminals. Thus, homicide rates remain high in these countries. In short, homicide rates remain high when police officers and judges are in a position of weakness in relation to criminals and are intimidated by them.

This situation is in contrast with what we know about the police and the justice system in countries with low homicide rates. These countries have structured and disciplined police organizations with sufficient numbers of personnel, who can be mobilized to provide an advantageous show of force in the event of clashes. Under these conditions, police officers are able to solve many crimes, arrest the perpetrators, and exercise a deterrent effect.

In brief, homicides become rare during periods and in countries where police officers and judges are free of fear and able to spread fear among criminals.

3) From Passive Resignation to "Problem-Oriented" Policing

In New York, before Bratton's arrival in 1994, most senior officers and officers of the NYPD were resigned to passively witnessing the rise in crime, which they attributed to factors beyond their control, such as poverty, unemployment, and the breakdown of the family unit. High levels of violence were seen as fate, against which they were powerless. With Bratton, this resignation was cast aside and criminality was seen as a problem that could be solved. This reversal was not unique to New York. It also took place in several other cities in the United States and Canada. It was driven by public and government frustration as well as the emergence of "problem-oriented policing."

The fundamental idea behind problem-oriented policing is that police officers should not content themselves with enforcing the law and obeying orders; they should be able to identify problems that pose a threat to the security of their sector, take care to define them clearly, and then examine the solutions that have the best chances of resolving the problem defined. This model of action leads police actors to have a more pragmatic function than a legalistic one (Goldstein 1979, 1990).

Problem-oriented policing has gained a large following in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. The Center for Problem-Oriented Policing widely publishes a series of more than 90 guides, each dealing with a specific problem. The Center's site receives more than 10,000 visits each month. Most senior officials from the police services of the major American cities are familiar with problem-oriented policing and many officers endeavor to apply this method. Evaluations show that when police operations are planned and implemented using this method, results follow (Braga and Bond 2008; Clarke and Goldstein 2002; Weisburd and Braga 2006; Sherman 2013).

We can therefore make the claim that qualified police personnel trained in solving problems can implement solutions that reduce violent crime and other problems which, if they were to degenerate, could go as far as homicide.

4) From Being Spread Thin to "Hot Spot Policing"

Standard practice among most police forces is to distribute police presence relatively equally over an entire city. Excess law enforcement forces are concentrated in a particular area more in response to pressure from interest groups than in reaction to a concentration of misdemeanors and crimes. Often, urban sectors that have the greatest need for a strong police presence receive fewer personnel than other places. This practice has led to an ineffective dispersal of security means and is now subject to criticism. In fact, Sherman et al. (1989) have shown that 50% of calls to 911 in an American city came from 3% of the postal addresses and intersections of the city. Similar results have been reproduced in other American and Canadian cities (Braga 2005; Braga and Weisburd 2010; Nagin 2013).

As a practical consequence of these observations, it is more cost-efficient to target crime "hot spots" and direct more means to them than elsewhere. And the effectiveness of this line of action has been verified: high concentrations of police forces in the form of targeted patrols or even "crackdowns" in areas of high criminal concentration reduce crime rates in a measurable manner (Cusson and La Penna 2007; Braga and Weisburd 2010; Nagin 2013; Sherman 2013).

The targeting principle has been extended to other forms of criminal concentration besides hot spots. It is therefore

recommended to target days and times of increased criminal activity, repeat offenders, and repeat victims (Sherman 2013). Once one of these targets is identified as a priority, it must be analyzed to determine the concrete factors and modalities, then different possible solutions must be developed to determine which is best suited and presents the best chance of being effective.

V - Conclusion: How?

Most criminologists who deal with the impact of policing on crime rates tend to attribute it to high percentages of solved crimes. Yet there is much more involved in policing: prevention, surveillance, inspections, protection of potential victims, and conflict resolution (Cusson 2010).

Prevent. One of the first important initiatives of the Paris police lieutenant under Louis XIV was to light the streets. The change from almost complete darkness to lighting (albeit rudimentary lighting) made bandits vulnerable to the night watch and allowed pedestrians to see potential aggressors coming. On the other side of the English Channel, when the British government decided to create the Metropolitan Police of London, its preventive role was explicitly set out in its mission statement (Critchley 1972).

In New York, Boston, and many other American cities, the police practice of stopping and checking any suspicious individual in a hot spot, and questioning and frisking him or her had two effects: a considerable number of illegally carried firearms were confiscated and criminals developed the habit of leaving their guns at home. The claim "more guns, more homicides" is no longer valid. The more pistols and revolvers are available and close at hand, the more homicides will be committed, which helps us understand why homicides dropped in New York during the 1990s and 2000s and why homicide rates are much higher in the United States than in the rest of the Western world (Cook 2013).

Surveillance and deterrence. The vigilant presence of patrols in high crime areas, frequent stops, surveillance technology like video surveillance, and arrests increase the perceived risk of punishment.

Protect vulnerable people and places. Access controls, bulletproof glass, bulletproof vests, and bodyguards are some of the means used to protect areas at high risk of crime and people exposed to aggression. These means are mainly used by private security companies, but public policing can use them as well.

Resolve conflicts. When police officers dispatched by a 911 call intervene to prevent a brawl, domestic violence, altercations, or a fight from escalating, they are contributing to the peace and can prevent homicides.

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