Policing in the global North and the global South is becoming more alike. An increasingly common characteristic is the blurring of boundaries between rule-based and more personalized policing styles. Reasons for this approximation include a growing focus on fighting or preventing radicalisation globally, and a general debureaucratisation of policing that has occurred in the global North.

More than half of the world's population live in cities, and urban centres will absorb almost all population growth in the coming decades.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Prioritize support to the establishment and maintenance of bureaucratic checks and balances, as this is essential to ensure legitimacy of the police.
- Question forms of policing that rely on suspicion-based preventive practices or arbitrary use of violence, even if popularly normalised.
- Pay attention to how positive and negative aspects of CVE/counter-terrorist strategies to counter violence, extremism or terror directly and indirectly shape contemporary policing across the global North and South.
Policing is a form of social control that includes processes of surveillance and the threat or use of physical punishment to make and sustain order.

The growing size and density of cities combined with increasing inequality between their inhabitants, means that urban areas have become sites of intensified insecurity and violence. This occurs in a context where a multitude of actors makes claims to policing urban violence. While the mandate of the police is to enforce the law, police work in practice often extends beyond the official mandate of state-sanctioned law enforcement and crime regulation, breaking down clear-cut divisions between public and private. Policing in the global South and North is usually characterized as vastly different by researchers and policy-makers alike. However, by exploring how the state police make order in urban settings around the world, global commonalities emerge, including the blurring of boundaries between bureaucratic and more intuitive policing styles.

Policing across the North-South divide
Policing in the global South is commonly seen as taking place in a context of limited statehood. In turn, this means that a multitude of actors – such as gangs, ex-combatants and private security firms – engages in and makes claims to policing the city in the absence of the state police. This emphasis tends to put the role of the state police in the background and means that the global South is approached as somewhat unique, even exotic, when it comes to the role of so-called non-state actors.

Yet, contemporary policing practices in the global South are not necessarily substantially different from those in the North. One of the reasons for this is that policing of complex urban security threats in the North associated with radicalization and terrorism have given rise to an expansion of policing beyond security-related aspects of law enforcement.

Covert policing and security as social welfare
A major shift in policing practices, which has contributed to greater resemblance on a global scale, began in the early 2000s in the context of the “War on Terror”. Across the world, countering violence and extremism has gradually legitimized more covert policing practices that push and sometimes cross the boundary of what is within the rule of law. In Nairobi, for instance, where terrorist attacks are linked to Somali refugees, policing has translated into arbitrary arrests, and practices that disregard national and international law.

In Europe, the agenda to counter violence and extremism has legitimized the extension of policing practices into new sectors of the welfare system, and thereby blurred boundaries between security and other public services. The ‘Aarhus Model’ in Denmark was established as a counter-radicalization initiative that is run by a variety of social services, including the youth sector, unemployment centre, street-based workers, social-psychiatric services – and the police.

The partial dissolution of what constitutes a particular policing task is reinforced further by the way in which radicalization is depicted. The ‘Aarhus Model’ uses the World Health Organization’s model for how epidemics spread to explain the dangers of radicalisation. While Danish authorities do not see the relationship between radicalization and a virus as one-to-one, they see radicalization as something that spreads, and while some are more at risk than others are, everyone can be ‘infected’.

Proximity and plural policing
An emerging commonality between policing in the global South and North is the blurring of boundaries between bureaucratic, rule-based and more personalized and intuitive policing styles.
When states are considered fragile or failing, a central characteristic is a weak bureaucratic system that lacks administrative and political checks and balances. Fragility and failure are labels that are applied to a number of states in the global South. At the same time, the perception that bureaucratisation – or too much of it – is negative and even, anti-liberal, influences the evolution of policing practices in the global North.

Police reform in the Netherlands, for instance, has over the past years sought to minimize the distance between the public and the police by debureaucratising policing practices. This involves minimizing the paperwork and administration that is part of working within state institutions, but creates distance between police and population. The rationale behind debureaucratisation is that police officers should be in the streets, not behind desks.

This has led to a move from ‘state externality’ to ‘state proximity’, which blurs the boundary between professional and private identities of police officers. These processes of blurring have facilitated a shift from criminal to popular justice, including racial profiling, which is increasingly central to policing practices across both the global South and North.

The move from rule-based to more intuitive policing styles has also facilitated the appropriation of military techniques. This ranges from the employment of military equipment in the fight against urban crime to an array of propaganda methods to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of the population.

Debureaucratisation in the global North may have diminished the distance between the police and the policed, and made the demarcation of competencies between state institutions progressively blurred. However, in several countries, primarily across the global South, the extension of policing beyond state-sanctioned law enforcement has never diminished, because bureaucratic practices always played a limited role in this regard. In Maputo, for instance, the police in many cases work through constant negotiation of legality and popular legitimacy. What is at stake is the status of the police, indeed, the definition of what the state should and should not do.

**Violence against the police and police violence**

Police violence is rarely applied without a degree of acceptance from a cross-section of the population that fears crime, terrorism or both. However, the police is not only the perpetrator, but also a victim of violence.
In Dhaka, Bangladesh, kneecapping is used methodically to punish suspects, and in Rio de Janeiro politicians and the police depict policing as warfare in certain parts of the city. Policing in these contexts is often accompanied by considerable risk for local communities, but also for the officers themselves. In Rio, officers perceive their routines inside and outside their job as unsafe. They risk assassinations, for instance, during armed assaults when they respond to a robbery or if the perpetrators realise that they are robbing a member of the police. At times, they are victims of targeted attacks.

As the police seek to maintain and enforce urban order, different rules and practices often apply to different socio-economic and ethnic groups. Indeed, a moral boundary may be drawn between those who are allowed to live and those who are not. In poor urban settlements, in Nairobi for instance, policing strategies are built up around the explicit use of violence. The target of extra-judicial killings is commonly young men suspected of being thieves, (potential) terrorists or both.

Violent forms of policing are also prominent in the Philippine government’s War on Drugs. In Manila, the police portray themselves as working inside the law, yet act outside it. This form of policing has created a climate of fear that is used as an order-making strategy; yet, fear and insecurity are experienced by the policed and police alike.

The broader population in Nairobi and Manila observes extra-judicial killings ambiguously. In Manila, the government’s War on Drugs is legitimate in the sense that the visibility of drugs and crime have decreased. Fundamentally, the public accepts the premise of the war on drugs, that is, the existence of a drug crisis in the Philippines. In Nairobi, violent actions by the police are to some extent accepted both inside and outside poor urban settlements, because they are linked to perceived corruption and inefficiency of the judiciary.

This policy brief presents notable points of discussion from a workshop on urban policing held in Copenhagen on 22-23 June 2017. The workshop was hosted by DIIS · Danish Institute for International Studies and the Danish Institute against Torture (DIGNITY).

Peter Albrecht, Senior Researcher, DIIS (paa@diis.dk) and Maya Mynster Christensen, Postdoc, Dignity (mmnc@dignityinstitute.dk), with: Mette-Louise Johansen, Aarhus University; Helene Marie Kyed, DIIS; Paul Mutsaers, Tilburg School of Humanities; Dennis Pauschinger, University of Neuchâtel; Finn Stepputat, DIIS; Francesco Colona, University of Amsterdam; Jairo Matalana-Villarreal, University of Kent/ELTE University; Louise Wuiff Moe, Helmut Schmidt University; Naomi von Stapel, Radboud University; Anna Warburg, Dignity/Aalborg University; Steffen Jensen, Dignity/Aalborg University; Kari Bygard Larsen, Dignity/University of Copenhagen; Brigitte Dragsted Mutengwa, Dignity/Aalborg University; Louise Wiuff Moe, Helmut Schmidt University.

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