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Perceptions of police corruption in Medellín

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Conventional wisdom holds that police corruption is a scourge across Latin America, undermining citizens' trust in and collaboration with police officers. We find that this does not describe police-community relations in Medellín. Using original survey data in Medellín, we find perceptions of police corruption are only weakly correlated with perceptions of police quality along other dimensions. This finding echoes evidence from qualitative field notes from more than 400 police-community meetings, where citizens seldom voiced concerns about police corruption, but often voiced concerns about other aspects of police performance.

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Percepciones de corrupción policial en Medellín

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La sabiduría convencional sostiene que la corrupción policial es un flagelo en toda América Latina, lo que socava la confianza de los ciudadanos y la colaboración con los agentes policiales. Encontramos que esto no describe las relaciones entre la policía y la comunidad en Medellín. Utilizando datos de encuestas originales en Medellín, encontramos que las percepciones de corrupción policial solo se correlacionan débilmente con las percepciones de la calidad policial en otras dimensiones. Este hallazgo hace eco de la evidencia proveniente de notas de campo cualitativas de más de 400 reuniones entre la policía y la comunidad, donde los ciudadanos rara vez expresaron preocupaciones sobre la corrupción policial, pero a menudo expresaron preocupaciones sobre otros aspectos del desempeño policial.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Conventional wisdom holds that police corruption is a scourge across Latin America, undermining citizens' trust in and collaboration with police officers (e.g., Economist, 2014). Sabet (2013), for example, finds that Mexican citizens' experiences with police corruption are more predictive of their overall dissatisfaction with police than are actual security outcomes. He concludes with a policy recommendation: to improve citizens' satisfaction with the police, root out corruption. According to this account, exclusive focus on improving citizen security outcomes (reducing homicide rates, for example) may be misplaced.

We find that this does not describe police-community relations in Medellín, Colombia. Using an original survey of more than 5,000 residents, we find that perceptions of police corruption are very weakly correlated with perceptions of police professionalism, fairness, or capacity. Nor do perceptions of corruption covary with neighborhood security outcomes such as crime rates, suggesting that citizens do not view police corruption as the root cause of insecurity.

Moreover, we use qualitative field notes from more than 400 police-community meetings in Medellín to characterize the key features of police-community dialogue about corruption. One striking finding is that citizens seldom voice concerns about police corruption, relative to issues like noise violations or deficient trash collection. While some observations suggest that citizens may be hesitant to confront police officers with accusations of corruption, the bulk of the evidence indicates that petty police corruption is simply not top-of-mind.

These findings are perhaps consistent with cross-country survey evidence indicating that Colombians pay bribes to police much less frequently than citizens of other Latin American countries (Sabet, 2013, pg. 25). Still, our results are surprising given the immediate context. During the period of our study, high-level officials in Medellín were charged with taking bribes from armed *combos*. Even in this context of high-profile and widely reported accounts of police corruption, citizen concerns and complaints focused on police efficacy (or lack thereof)—and less than half of our survey respondents agreed (or strongly agreed) with the statement “the police are corrupt.” A mere 17 percent strongly agree.

Taken together, we interpret these findings as evidence that, when it comes to citizen perceptions of the police, not all good things go together. Citizens dissatisfied with the police along one dimension do not necessarily also view them as corrupt, nor do those who perceive police corruption necessarily view police as inefficacious or unfair. Indeed, the relationship between corruption and efficacy is ambiguous in theory: on the one hand, corruption diverts resources and time from productive police activity; on the other hand, it might (in certain circumstances) increase the returns to police activity, thus incentivizing effort. We therefore join Sabet and others in highlighting the value of disentangling *citizen perceptions of police corruption* from citizen perceptions of police quality along other dimensions.

2 | LITERATURE

Our work contributes to literature on police corruption, citizen attitudes toward police, and the role of police-community dialogue in improving relations.

Since the 1990s, civil society and citizen participation have received increasing attention from scholars as a potential source of external accountability that could decrease police misconduct while also improving trust in the police (see Fruhling et al., 2003; Ungar, 2011). Scholars and activists have argued that militarized police models as well as the politicization of the police has contributed to a hypertrophic relationship between citizens and police. This has resulted in a lack of external and civilian oversight to audit and oversee police

conduct and resources, as well as little attention devoted to citizens' concerns (Arias and Ungar, 2009; Silva and Soares, 2012; Chevigny, 2003).

Citizens, then, have come to be defined as a previously untapped source of external oversight and accountability, a solution to the problem of police insulation, misconduct, and politicization. Chêne (2012) argues that increased interactions between police officers and citizens may change the way the police operate and increase accountability to the communities officers serve. Meško and Ziembo-Vogl (2000) use case studies of community policing to argue that models of policing that increase citizen-police interactions may improve job satisfaction as officers gain a sense of purpose and recognition, impacting forms of corruption that stem from frustration with the police force.

Nevertheless, previous research on community policing initiatives that include police-community meetings has produced mixed evidence regarding effects on corruption and perceptions of it (see Sabet, 2012). One reason for these mixed results is the variation in contexts and degree of implementation.

For example, comparing the cases of Bogotá, São Paulo, and Buenos Aires, González (2016, 135) has argued that the impacts of police-community meetings vary according to three factors 1) the inclusivity and breadth of participation encouraged by institutions, 2) the degree to which societal actors are endowed with responsibilities and faculties to achieve goals and 3) the formal obligations imposed on police and state officials to participate and the degree to which they must comply with community demands. González describes the case of Bogotá as case of "thin" participation due to low levels of inclusiveness, societal authority, and police obligations.

Nevertheless, even in cases of thin participation, where citizens have little formal authority to collectively shape police behavior, interactions with police officers at meetings can still shape citizens' beliefs. The ways in which officers respond to and reframe claims of corruption in thin participatory spaces may affect how citizens perceive police corruption. Indeed, this seems to have been the case with Colombia's *Frentes de Seguridad Local*, which improved relations with the police and perceptions of security (see CCB, 2006), while providing little formal or informal possibilities of holding local police accountable (González 2016).

3 | CORRUPTION IS NOT THE OPPOSITE OF EFFICACY

We use an original survey of more than 5,000 residents of Medellín to investigate the correlates of perceptions of police corruption. The survey was carried out in person at respondents' homes between April and June, 2018.

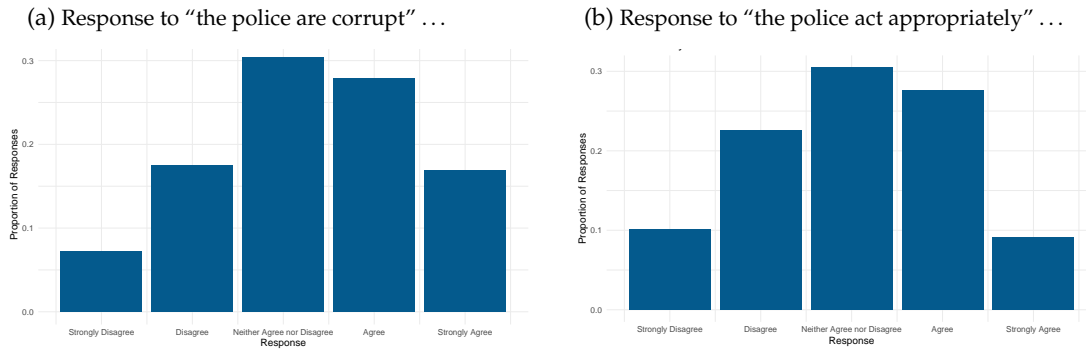
Figure 1a plots the distribution of responses to the question, "How much do you agree with the statement, 'the police are corrupt'?" 45% of respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement, while the majority are neutral or disagree. A smaller proportion of respondents view the police as ineffective (Figure 1b): 33% of respondents strongly disagree or disagree with the statement, "the police act appropriately in response to citizen comments and complaints about security in their communities."

One might think that these respondents with negative views of police corruption and police efficacy are largely the same people: that residents who view the police as corrupt also view them as unresponsive, unprofessional, unfair, and unable to effectively respond to requests or investigate crimes. In fact, we find that views of police corruption are only weakly correlated with perceptions of police quality along other dimensions.

We asked respondents how much they agreed about a series of statements about the police, on a five-point scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree). Those who agreed with the statement "the police are corrupt" were some-

FIGURE 1 Perceptions of police corruption and police efficacy

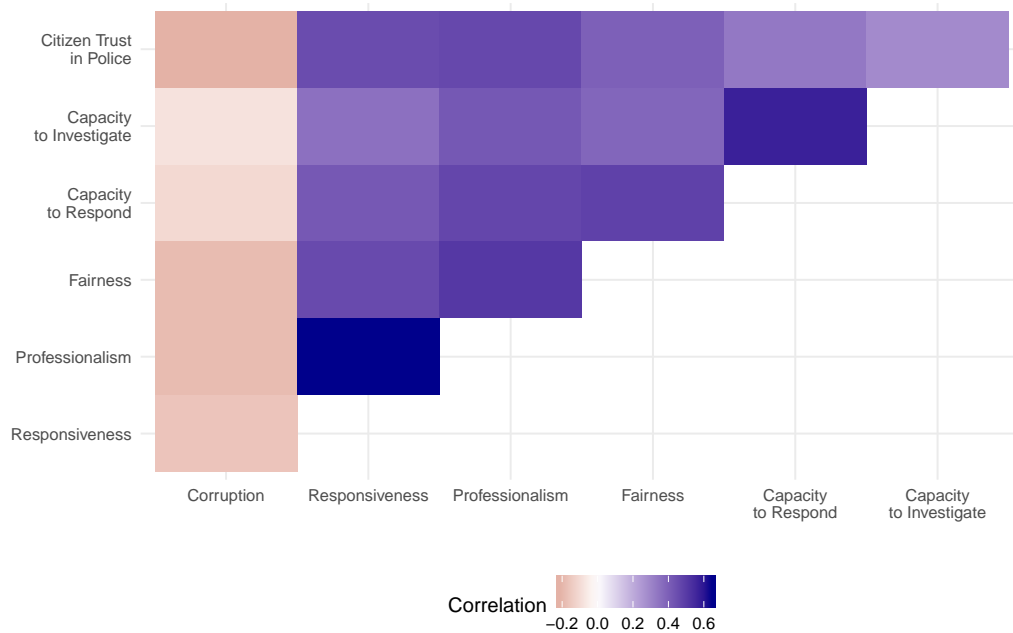
These figures plot the distribution of responses to questions about police corruption (a) and efficacy (b). Specifically, for Figure (b), respondents were asked how much they agree with the statement “The police act appropriately in response to citizen comments and complaints about security in their communities.”



what less likely to agree with statements like “the police have the capacity to respond to crime reports,” but the correlation between these responses is weak: just -0.1 . Nor is this anomalous: the strongest correlation between perceptions of police corruption and perceptions of other aspects of police quality is -0.18 .

FIGURE 2 For citizens, corruption is not the opposite of efficacy

This figure plots correlations among responses to questions about various aspects of police quality. Each question asks respondents how much they agree with a given statement (“the police are corrupt,” “the police have the capacity to respond to crime reports”), giving five options: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree.



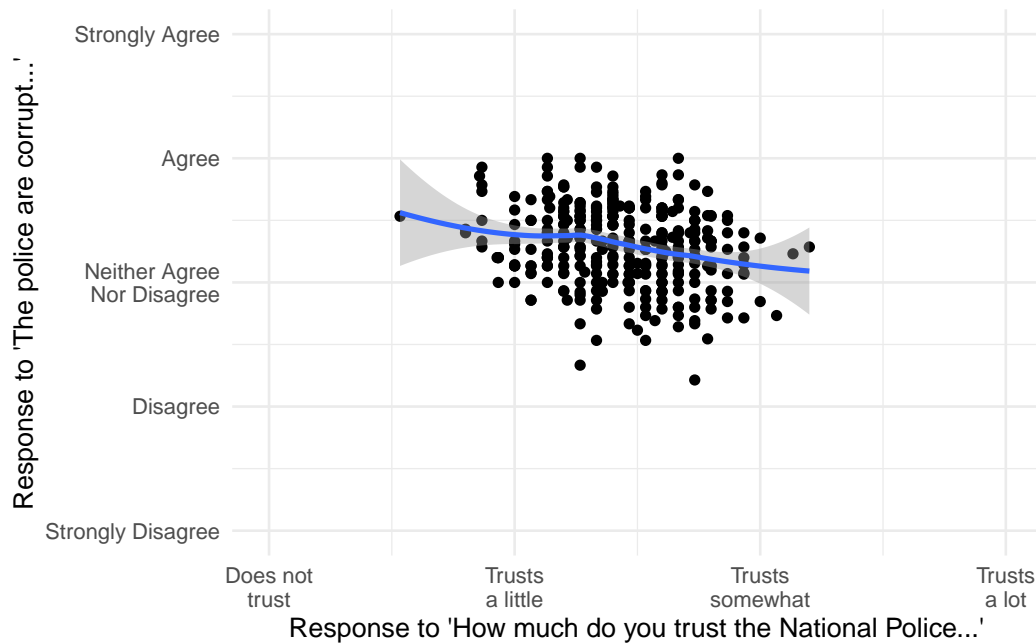
Other aspects of police quality, in contrast, are strongly correlated. For example, the extent to which respondents agree with the statement “the police have the capacity to respond to crime reports” and with the statement “the police provide the same quality of service to all citizens” is 0.46. In other words, people who have faith in policy capacity also

have faith in police equity. But corruption is distinct. People with pessimistic views of the police do not automatically think that officers are corrupt, too.

Figure 2 visualizes the full correlation matrix among perceptions of various aspects of police performance. That perceptions of police corruption are negatively correlated with perceptions of desirable police qualities is not surprising; what is surprising is that these correlations are so weak: between -0.1 and -0.18 . In contrast, perceptions of police professionalism, capacity, and fairness are highly correlated (0.4 – 0.6).

FIGURE 3 Can citizens trust corrupt police?

This figure plots the relationship between citizen perceptions of police corruption and citizen trust in the police. Each point denotes a police beat (cuadrante).



The results on *trust in the police* are especially surprising given related findings from elsewhere in the region. Sabet (2013), for example, finds that perceptions of police corruption and confidence in police are strongly negatively correlated both across countries in Latin America and across individuals within Mexico. In Medellín, in contrast, we find that agreement with “the police are corrupt” and trust in the police (four-point scale) is correlated just -0.2 . Figure 4 plots the bivariate relationship at the police beat level.

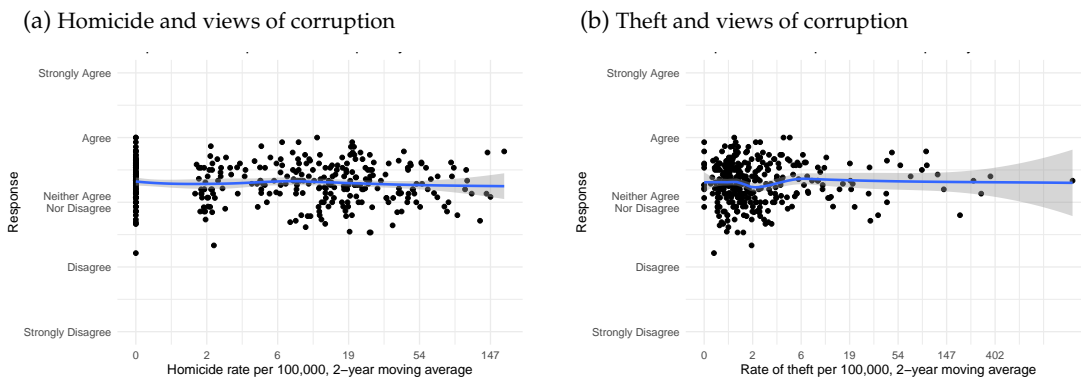
Turning to neighborhood-level correlates of perceptions of police corruption, we observe that a core indicator of police performance—namely, crime rates—appears uncorrelated with citizens’ perceptions of police corruption.¹ Figure 4 plots the relationship between respondents’ perceptions of police corruption and *actual* (not perceived) crime rates in their police beats, according to administrative data. The results reveal that residents in high-crime neighborhoods are no more likely to view the police as corrupt than residents in low-crime neighborhoods. This underscores our interpretation of the data thus far: for Medellín residents, not all bad police qualities go together; rather, they hold beliefs about police corruption that are measurably distinct from their beliefs about other aspects of officer performance or security outcomes. Further, while there is moderate spatial clustering of

¹Note that the administrative measures of crime graphed on the x-axis in 4 correlate positively with citizen reports of crime victimization (for theft, $\rho = .38$).

crime, citizen perceptions of police corruption do not cluster geographically, either within beats or stations (*estaciones*).

FIGURE 4 Crime rates do not predict perceptions of corruption

These figures plot perceptions of police corruption against actual (not perceived) crime rates in respondents' police beats, according to administrative data.



As a check on any possible issues with the wording of our survey question about police corruption, or with how respondents interpreted the question, we check whether perceptions of police corruption covary with self-reported experiences of police abuse. Reassuringly, they do (Figure 5a). Respondents who report that they or an acquaintance experienced “verbal aggression” or “illegitimate use of force” at the hands of a police officer are *much* more likely to strongly agree with the statement “the police are corrupt.” These correlations are not surprising, but they do suggest that our question about police corruption captures something meaningful about respondents’ perceptions of the police.

Further, we find that citizens that have been victimized or know someone who has been the victim of a crime in the last six months are somewhat more likely to agree that the police are corrupt. Thus in contrast to the beat-level measures of crime, there is suggestive evidence that individual victimization covaries with corruption perceptions. Exposure to police or police failures to provide security correlate with worse perceptions of the police in general, including corruption, as shown in Figure 5b. However, crime afflicts a small proportion of respondents: just 27.6% report *any* form of victimization in the last six months. This rate is low enough that we are unable to identify subtle differences in rates of crime in a sample of 15 respondents per beat, reconciling our findings with those in Figure 4. As such, the data suggest that personal experiences with security failures (or those of acquaintances) correlate with higher awareness of police corruption or simply more negative views of the police in general. However, there is little evidence that variation in individuals’ surroundings – neighborhood safety, individual officers patrolling the beat, or crime outcomes – covaries with perceptions of police corruption.

Aside from individual victimization – by crime or the police – what features predict corruption perceptions? We find two robust predictors of perceptions of corruption in the demographic data. More educated respondents are more likely to characterize the police as corrupt (Figure 6a) while older respondents are less likely to characterize the police as less corrupt (Figure 6b). Differing perceptions could be driven by different *experiences* with the police or different *expectations* of the police. While we do not have the data to assess the mechanism underlying these correlations, they suggest two ways through which community policing interventions could change perceptions of police corruption.

FIGURE 5 Individual-level correlates of perceptions of police corruption

These figures plot perceptions of police corruption against (a) self-reported experience of police abuse and (b) self-reported crime victimization.

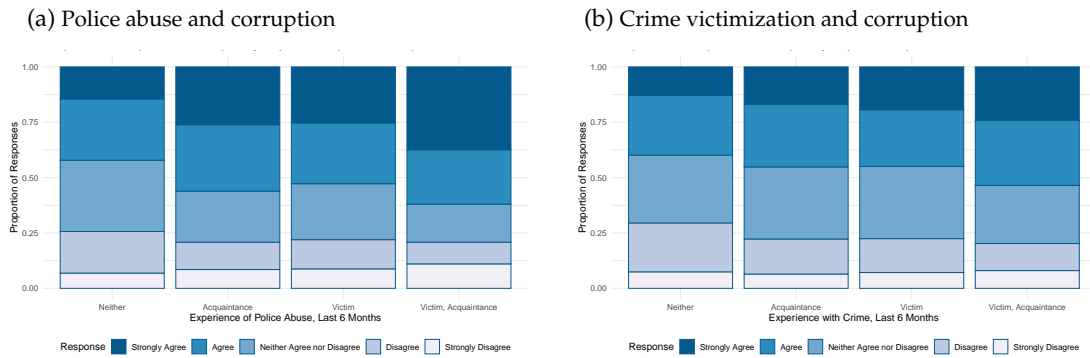
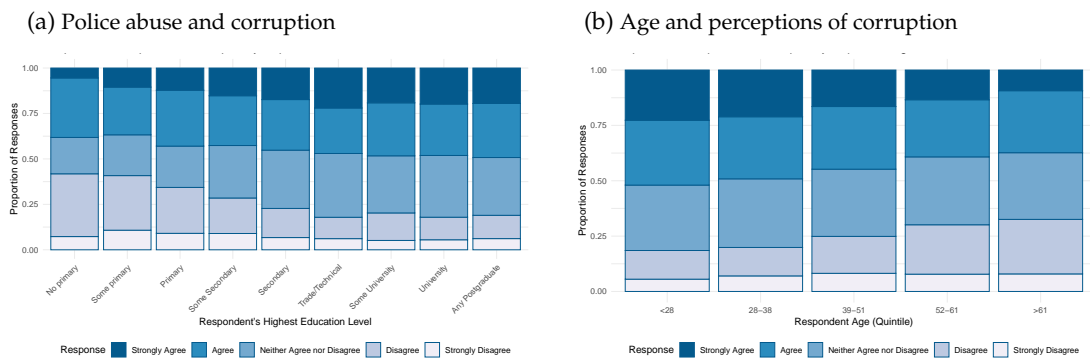


FIGURE 6 Individual-level correlates of perceptions of police corruption

These figures plot perceptions of police corruption against respondent (a) education and (b) age.



4 | WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT POLICE CORRUPTION

While the analysis of survey data sheds some light on perceptions of police corruption in Medellín, it tells us little about whether residents view eradicating corruption as a priority. Nor does it tell us how police themselves perceive and speak about petty corruption. For this, we turn to qualitative data collected in more than 400 police-community meetings held across the city in 2018 and 2019.

The most striking result of this qualitative analysis is that police corruption was rarely mentioned in police-meetings. In comparison to the number of times other concerns and complaints were brought up—noise, drug use in public, trash problems, etc.—the lack of conversation around police corruption coding was clear. When they did discuss it, participants seemed more willing to discuss street-level corruption and bureaucratic corruption, largely remaining silent on criminal infiltration.

For example, in one meeting a complaint about noise levels coming from a *discoteca* in the neighborhood generated a discussion about the police intentionally ignoring calls and complaints about the matter. One of the men in attendance was visibly frustrated and annoyed; for him:

Lo más grave para él es que la inspectora que cubre ese sector no hace nada para acabar con el problema. Pero además cuando ha llamado a las líneas de la policía por el ruido excesivo estos

tampoco han llegado nunca. La policía debe ser neutral, pero se nota que los de ese cuadrante son amigos del dueño; por eso la Policía tiene tan mala imagen, porque no actúa.

Participants rarely brought up specific complaints regarding criminal infiltration. In some instances, participants were hushed or quietly told by others in the meeting, including community leaders, to not discuss topics related to criminal organizations. Some participants did voice specific reports of police corruption to our meeting moderators, but these reports were usually made either before the police had arrived to the meetings or after they had left. In one case, a leader of the local Junta de Accion Comunal (JAC) arrived at a meeting only to apologize to the moderator that she and others she knew would not be attending because they were afraid of the police. She reported having video of police officers exchanging money at a particular location in the neighborhood, but said they were afraid to turn the tapes over to the police; the woman was even skeptical of sharing the videos with anyone at the mayor's office.

None of this is to say that police-community meetings have not affected officers' responses to corruption. Although participants may have been hesitant to discuss police corruption in meetings, on a number of occasions our research assistants recorded in their notes informal conversation that took place between community residents and officers after meetings. Even where residents did not discuss cases of corruption, residents did discuss actions that the police take (or fail to take) that gives the impression that the police are "comprados."

In our meetings, the police largely served as "legal brokers" (Coutin 2003), listening to complaints and "accepting, rejecting, or reframing residents' claims" (Roussell and Gascón 2014, 2). Participants' roles were limited to voicing claims and concerns.

Police officers responded to concerns and complaints of corruption in four ways: ignoring the issue, recommending that citizens report corruption, explaining corruption through the "bad apple" narrative, and embedding police corruption within the broader problem of corruption within state institutions.

Though not a common response, some police officers simply did not respond to criticism about corruption. In one meeting, a middle-aged man who was a JAC leader said that a major problem in the area was the *compra de policías*. He stated that the JAC had identified some of these officers and the days they arrived to pick up their money. The *Intendente*, the ranking officer at the meeting, did not acknowledge the comment but instead moved on to a different topic of discussion.

In some cases, officers responded by explaining how and where citizens could make formal complaints. In all cases identified thus far, officers encouraged citizens to report cases of corruption, but without providing specific information about how this could be done. In general, it did not appear that officers were well prepared to respond to concerns about corruption. More often than not, officers referred to the *Oficinas de Atención al Ciudadano de la Policía Nacional* in very broad terms (for example, *una oficina de reclamo*), rather than specifically identifying where and how citizens could report corruption. In no instances did officers explain to citizens how the process of reporting police misconduct worked.

If people already distrust the police or the reporting process, it is unlikely that they will feel comfortable reporting cases of misconduct, particularly if this process (and the mechanisms in place to keep their complaints anonymous) is not explained. In the majority of qualitative notes analyzed, community residents voiced concerns that citizens' reports (whether or not they had to do with the police) were not confidential or anonymous. When citizens voiced concerns that the police handed names of those who made reports to gangs or the individuals who were the subjects of the reports, officers often responded that this was not possible because calls were anonymous. These conversations generate an interactional impasse: citizens detail why they do not trust the reporting systems while officers assure

them that they can, but with little to no evidence or reasoning to counterbalance individuals' stories of why they do not feel safe reporting.

A more common response when citizens mentioned corruption was to resort to a bad-apple narrative, explaining to citizens that while some officers did engage in misconduct, most are committed to their jobs and want to serve the public. This response produced two different reactions. In some cases, it seemed to produce anxiety among community residents, who were unclear as to how they were supposed to identify the good cops from the bad ones:

Una señora cuenta que ella no confía en la policía y que si ella va a dejar su casa sola no le diría a la policía, que ella ha visto videos en internet donde se ve como los pillos le entregan dinero a la policía para que los cuiden o les permitan hacer muchos delitos, que con el perdón de los patrulleros pero que a ella le parece que la policía no es confiable, que antes hay que huir de ellos, los patrulleros le responden que ellos saben que hay policías buenos y policías malos, uno de los patrulleros le dice que él con seguridad ha logrado coger a gente que se lo merece y que no hay por qué generalizar, porque él en particular se siente que es uno de los policías buenos. La señora se cruza de brazos y hace un gesto de desagrado, pero le dice "Uno entiende lo que usted dice, pero como hace para saber cuáles son buenos y cuales son malos, eso se confía o no se confía, es simple", parece que los argumentos del patrullero no la han convencido.

In this explanation, rotten-apple cops are responsible for the onset and maintenance of corruption in particular departments. This logic implies that corruption can be corrected by weeding out particular bad cops (Crank 1998: 229). As Punch (304) notes, police corruption is, by necessity, group behavior: "Police officers have to be initiated into these practices, rationalizations have to be produced to accept them, supervisors have to collude or turn a blind eye, justifications have to be sought to continue them, and organizations have either in some way to condone or encourage these activities." In contrast, corruption in the bad apple narrative becomes individualized, despite the fact that police corruption is behavior that depends on complicity and active socialization practices throughout the police hierarchy.

In the institutional explanation, police officers described corruption as the inevitable result of cultural practices that had deeply saturated state institutions, lamenting the degree of corruption throughout the government. In some cases officers referred to the mayor's office, in others the court system, while others made reference to all levels and branches of government. Interviews conducted before the implementation of the intervention suggest that this is already a "commonsense" explanation shared among community residents. When asked if they thought the police were corrupt, people responded with answers such as: "Of course the police are corrupt, but how is an officer not going to become corrupt in the system we have here?"

Interviewees pointed to high-profile cases of corruption, such as the secretary of security or the president of the supreme court, to demonstrate how rotten the system was, from top to bottom. Some even had very positive responses about their interactions with police officers, but when asked about corruption they agreed that this was a problem that had contaminated all state institutions.

Because this explanation already has significant cultural purchase, in some cases complaints of corruption produced conversations of sympathy and commiseration between the police and citizens. For example, when participants in one meeting complained about police performance in the area patrol officers responded by saying that they were trying their best to capture and detain criminals, but that the court system often let them go without explanation. There was general agreement that this was due to corruption throughout the criminal justice system.

In these conversations, officers and residents became aligned against broader institutional failures that kept officers from being able to do the work they were committed to

doing. As [Portes and Sensenbrenner \(1993\)](#) note, “oppositional solidarity” can generate trust and cement ties within small groups. Thus, these conversations may have worked to solidify police-community relationships.

While these responses may allow individual officers to build trust with those in the meeting, they may also contribute to negative perceptions of the police as an institution overall, and perhaps state institutions more generally. In contrast to the belief that trust built within interactions with police officers is converted into “trust in the state more generally” ([Blair et al. 2018](#); see also [Mazerolle et al. 2013](#)), these interactions may consolidate negative perceptions of state institutions as they build trust between citizens and individual representatives of those institutions.

These responses could also reinforce the idea that corruption is already so ingrained in state institutions that it is a fact everyone must resign themselves to accepting. As one community leader put it: “The problem is that corruption is crushing all social classes, all political sectors, all of the state, everywhere: la corrupción es el pan nuestro de cada día.”

These kinds of interactions might explain why efforts to improve community-police relations could produce a number of positive outcomes, but still fail to improve citizens perceptions of the police, courts, and government more broadly (see [Blair et al. 2018](#)).

Finally, although not often used as a direct response to comments about corruption, it is worth noting here a topic of discussion that police officers brought up at every meeting we organized: the lack of police personnel in the city. Some explained this as the result of a mass wave of retirement of officers that occurred recently, while others simply chalked it up to a lack of state investment in the police as an institution. In a few cases, officers started the meeting by discussing the issue, as if responding to citizens’ complaints before they were able to make them publicly; some officers mentioned the issue up to four times in one meeting.

Officers explained that the reduced number of officers meant that they were covering multiple beats at once; that response time had been heavily affected; and that officers had to prioritize certain calls over others in the moment, which could give the impression that they were not responding. In some instances, this explanation led participants to comment on the lack of efficiency and efficacy throughout state institutions:

Un señor comenta pero es que le dan plata a los policías que vienen y luego ellos se van y se hacen los de la vista gorda, y es partamos del hecho de que ni siquiera están presentes aquí en esta reunión, estos que no vinieron se les nota lo responsables que son con su trabajo (todo esto lo dice en tono irónico y sarcástico se nota que esta disgustado por la ausencia de los patrulleros en la reunión) y continúa diciendo: es que aquí en el papel, en el volante decía que era la reunión era con la policía y vea ¿dónde están los patrulleros? En ese momento les explicamos que los patrulleros son muy poquitos para todas las problemáticas y que seguramente deben estar atendiendo alguna situación en este momento y el señor continúa: no, es que esto es una problemática a nivel nacional y es propia de nuestro país, es que la fuerza pública no cubre las necesidades de la ciudadanía.

However, given that meeting participants often explained that it is police unresponsiveness to calls and reports that gave them the impression that officers are corrupt, officers’ explanation of resource constraints as affecting their performance may reduce perceptions of police corruption. Thus, this explanation may also increase trust and confidence in local officers, but yet again at the expense of confidence in state institutions.

5 | CONCLUSION

The picture that emerges from this study is one of a population more concerned with police (in)efficacy and (un)responsiveness than with corruption per se. Consider [a video](#) of a police

operation that went viral in Colombia several years ago: officers approach a parked car in which several suspects are asleep. For twenty minutes they knock on the windows, trying to wake the suspects up. When the suspects finally wake up, they simply drive away—despite the presence of several police cars that could have blocked their passage. A low-speed car chase ensues. The comments capture frustration about the officers' lack of training: "[The police] look like they're [the suspect's] motorcade, hahaha."

Press reports and academic literature alike are full of prescriptions for fixing police corruption in Latin America. From stricter entrance requirements to better training, from higher salaries to pay-for-performance, policymakers and politicians across the region have pledged to root out bribe solicitation and other forms of petty extortion. Our results suggest that these efforts may be insufficient to improve the quality of policing. In a setting in which perceptions of police corruption are lower than in many other Latin American cities and engaged citizens do not cite corruption as the most salient issue in policing, citizens continue to hold grave assessments of police efficacy. This evidence suggests that while rooting out corruption may be necessary, it is likely insufficient for improving policing and security.

We emphasize the need to understand the relationship between corruption and other metrics of performance. The negative relationship between police corruption and efficacy/quality that we find in Medellín is much weaker than suggested by existing literature. As such, our results suggest that, in some contexts, a laser focus on police corruption may distract from more pressing policy needs. Examining the correlates of citizens' views of the police, using both survey responses and qualitative measures, can guide prioritization of reform efforts.

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