

Addressing an Ambivalent Relationship: Policing and the Urban Poor in Mexico City

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Abstract. This article analyses citizen–police relations in the marginalised Mexico City borough of Iztapalapa. It demonstrates that despite predominantly negative perceptions about and experiences with the police, local residents do not abandon state institutions as security providers. The article claims that as formal and informal access to the legal and coercive powers of the police provides an important resource for local residents needing to resolve individual or collective security problems and conflicts in their favour, local police forces continue to be addressed and imagined by residents as relevant security actors.

Keywords: policing, state–society relations, Mexico City, urban marginality

Introduction

A recent publication from the Inter-American Development Bank states that Latin American cities are confronted with the dual challenge of extending the benefits of urban development to all inhabitants and of minimising ‘socially deviant behaviours’ in the form of ‘delinquency and criminal activity’.¹ This

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¹ Eduardo Rojas, ‘The Metropolitan Regions of Latin America: Problems of Governance and Development’, in Eduardo Rojas, Juan R. Cuadrado-Roura and José Miguel Fernández Güell (eds.), *Governing the Metropolis: Principles and Cases* (Washington, DC, and Cambridge, MA: Inter-American Development Bank and David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University, 2008), p. 10.

observation reflects the sense that throughout the region the ‘urbanisation of neoliberalism’ experienced in recent decades has been accompanied by increasing levels of social polarisation as well as by a dramatic increase in crime and violence.² As a consequence, ‘citizens living in any major Latin American city find themselves victims to crime and are turning to some form of privatized protection’.³ The turn towards ‘privatized protection’ indicates that urban insecurity is both a reflection of a real or perceived rise in criminality and inseparable from problems with local police forces. In most cases the police are considered to be part of the problem and not the solution: basic rights and individual security are inadequately protected; the police are subject to ineffective controls; they are engaged in corruption and criminal activities; and their everyday practices are marked by arbitrary detentions, and abuses including torture and extralegal killings. The principal victims of these practices, it is widely acknowledged, are the marginalised and socially excluded segments of the population. In this regard, it has been argued that marginalised urban communities are marked by ‘a widespread lack of trust in the police’, which is ‘closely linked to corruption and human rights abuses’.⁴ These conditions, it is assumed, contribute to a situation in which local police forces ‘undergo delegitimization, violent crime and police abuse escalate, [and] the poor and the ethnically other are criminalized, dehumanized and attacked’.⁵ In these circumstances, the urban poor seem ‘least likely to report crimes to the authorities and are most likely to perceive the police or judiciary as distant, alien, or worse, hostile’.⁶ The dominant perception is that the urban poor in

² For urbanisation of neoliberalism see Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, ‘Cities and the Geographies of “Actually Existing Neoliberalism”’, in Brenner and Theodore (eds.), *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in North America and Western Europe* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 2–31. See also International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and World Bank, *Urban Crime and Violence in LAC: Status Report on Activities* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2008); Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt (eds.), *Fractured Cities: Social Exclusion, Urban Violence, and Contested Spaces in Latin America* (London: Zed, 2007); Caroline Moser and Cathy McIlwaine, *Encounters with Violence in Latin America: Urban Poor Perceptions from Colombia and Guatemala* (London: Routledge, 2004); and Susana Rotker (ed.), *Citizens of Fear: Urban Violence in Latin America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

³ Miguel Angel Centeno, *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), pp. 6–7.

⁴ Caroline Moser, Ailsa Winton and Annalise Moser, ‘Violence, Fear, and Insecurity among the Urban Poor in Latin America’, in Marianne Fay (ed.), *The Urban Poor in Latin America* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2005), p. 147.

⁵ James Holston, quoted in Orlando J. Pérez, ‘Democratic Legitimacy and Public Insecurity: Crime and Democracy in El Salvador and Guatemala’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 118: 4 (2003/4), p. 628.

⁶ Joseph S. Tulchin and Heather A. Golding, ‘Introduction: Citizen Security in Regional Perspective’, in Hugo Frühling, Joseph S. Tulchin and Heather A. Golding (eds.), *Crime and Violence in Latin America: Citizen Security, Democracy and the State* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 2.

Latin America are either abandoned by the state and its security forces or, when the latter are present, are their victims. In either scenario, the poor in turn abandon state institutions as security providers and seek alternative forms of security provision and conflict resolution ‘beyond the state’ through ‘reluctant membership in gangs or participation in crude protection rackets’.⁷

Recent empirical studies on urban violence and insecurity in Latin America, however, demonstrate that the reality of interactions between the police and the urban poor might be more complex than the ‘mutual abandonment’ perspective suggests. For instance, Sonneveld’s analysis of insecurity in a marginalised neighbourhood of Guadalajara shows that despite police inefficiency and corruption, far from being abandoned as security providers, the ‘police were clearly a particularly important actor within the Colonia Jalisco security market’.⁸ Similarly, Hinton argues that residents of working-class neighbourhoods in Rio de Janeiro resort to the police through informal channels in order ‘to resolve interpersonal conflicts’ and to force thieves ‘to return stolen property’.⁹ And Rodgers’ analysis of gang activities in Managua mentions one case where families of a gang-controlled neighbourhood called police officers in order to confront an escalation of inter-gang conflict that ‘was “too much” for the *barrio* population’.¹⁰

In analytical terms, these observations call for a relational perspective on the interaction of citizens and police in Latin America. In this regard, they echo the efforts of a growing number of scholars working on insecurity and violence in the region who are trying to conceptualise state–society relations beyond dichotomist zero-sum perspectives. Donna Lee Van Cott stresses the mutual interaction, rather than the exclusiveness, of formal and informal modes and actors of the administration of justice, and points towards the need to pay close attention to the multiple ways in which non-state actors, public officials and social actors ‘network together’.¹¹ Inside such networks, the provision of

⁷ Centeno, *Blood and Debt*, p. 7.

⁸ Monique Sonneveld, ‘Security at Stake: Dealing with Violence and Public (In)Security in a Popular Neighborhood in Guadalajara, Mexico’, in Gareth A. Jones and Dennis Rodgers (eds.), *Youth Violence in Latin America: Gangs and Juvenile Justice in Perspective* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 45–62.

⁹ Mercedes S. Hinton, *The State on the Streets: Police and Politics in Argentina and Brazil* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006), p. 113.

¹⁰ Dennis Rodgers, ‘When Vigilantes Turn Bad: Gangs, Violence and Social Change in Urban Nicaragua’, in David Pratten and Atreyee San (eds.), *Global Vigilantes* (London: Hurst, 2007), p. 363.

¹¹ Donna Lee Van Cott, ‘Dispensing Justice at the Margins of Formality: The Informal Rule of Law in Latin America’, in Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky (eds.), *Informal Institutions and Democracy: Lessons from Latin America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 249–73. The term ‘network together’ is from Enrique Desmond Arias, *Drugs and Democracy in Rio de Janeiro: Trafficking, Social Networks and Public Security* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p. 203.

'law and order' has been described as being shaped by the 'fluctuating order of parallel forces of local power players and "moral" authorities' who seek 'various forms of confrontation or accommodation with the legitimate authorities and with civil society'.¹² From a more structural perspective, such outcomes have been interpreted as reflections of the 'violent pluralism' of Latin America's societies, where the local political regimes coexist with organised violent non-state armed actors and 'multiple forms of substate order that exist separately from, but in constant interaction with, the state-sanctioned rule of law'.¹³

Although these studies are more concerned with questions of violence and insecurity than with policing and citizen–police relations, they provide an important analytical lens for studying the relationship between the police and the urban poor. In particular, they shift the focus of analysis towards the identification and analysis of patterns of *mutual interaction* between both actors. By drawing on the empirical and analytical insights of these studies, this article attempts to move beyond the dominant perspective of the relationship between the police and the urban poor as one of growing distance and mutual abandonment. Based on the results of empirical fieldwork in Iztapalapa, one of the most marginalised *delegaciones* (boroughs) of Mexico City, the article demonstrates that despite predominantly negative perceptions about and experiences with the police, local residents do not abandon state institutions as security providers. Rather, they continue to interact with the police by integrating them into their everyday strategies of security provision and conflict resolution, albeit in somewhat ambivalent ways. The article argues that the police remain relevant as a state institution endowed with exceptional coercive and legal powers, access to which represents an important resource for local residents in search of means to resolve individual or collective security problems and conflicts in their favour. Through modes of selective switching between different forms of police involvement in conflicts and security problems, local residents become central mediating agents within micro-level security governance arrangements, whose choices and actions are decisive in determining the public or private character of local policing under context-dependent conditions. The resulting citizen–police relations, the article further demonstrates, are situated along a continuum that ranges from the informal instrumentalisation of the police – that is, intentional efforts to use the police for a variety of personal goals outside officially sanctioned formal-legal ways; to patterns of formal instrumentalisation in which residents resort to the police through formal, legally sanctioned channels in order to provoke

¹² Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt, 'Introduction: The Duality of Latin American Cityspaces', in Koonings and Kruijt (eds.), *Fractured Cities*, pp. 17–18.

¹³ Enrique Desmond Arias and Daniel M. Goldstein, 'Violent Pluralism: Understanding the New Democracies of Latin America', in Arias and Goldstein (eds.), *Violent Democracies in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 20.

police intervention in their favour; to patterns of formal interaction in which the police are explicitly addressed as a public and impartial security provider.

Sources and Methodology

This article is based on 37 interviews conducted between 2006 and 2008 with residents of Iztapalapa, political leaders, NGO members and (ex-)members of the justice administration. The local residents interviewed were selected according to two criteria. First, although the borough of Iztapalapa is one of the most marginalised parts of Mexico City, it is far from homogeneous. In order to capture its internal socio-economic diversity, interviewees were selected from neighbourhoods that reflect these internal differences. Second, interviewees were selected from different age groups, with an attempt to include an equal amount of men and women in the sample. All interviews can be considered 'expert interviews'.¹⁴ This type of interview tries to obtain information relevant to the subject under consideration from people who, due to their position, knowledge and experience within a particular social setting, can be assumed to possess special knowledge about practices and processes within this context and can therefore be described as 'experts'.

The interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire, which was divided into two sections. The questions in the first section asked residents to describe their neighbourhood in general terms. In order to avoid question bias, notions of violence, (in)security, police and so on were not included in this first set of questions. The research design intended that if the interviewee did not reflect upon one of these issues in his or her answers, the interview would end at this stage. However, if the interviewee addressed questions of insecurity, violence or policing in their responses to the first set of questions, which all of them did, they would move on to the second section of the questionnaire, which asked residents to further reflect upon these issues. For example, interviewees were asked to describe their personal experiences with insecurity and policing and what the (in)security situation in their neighbourhood looks like, to detail which actors they believed to be involved in local security provision, and to give their opinion of the local institutions of the justice administration and explain to whom they turn, and why, in order to solve insecurity problems.

The interview data were analysed in two steps. First, situational maps were drawn 'that lay out the major human, nonhuman, discursive, historical, symbolic, cultural, political, and other elements in the research situation of

¹⁴ Alexander Bogner, Beate Littig and Wolfgang Menz (eds.), *Das Experteninterview: Theorie, Methode, Anwendung* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2005).

concern and provoke analysis among them'.¹⁵ These maps provided a first impression about what, from the perspective of the actors involved, 'matters' and 'makes a difference', what is a problem, and how and by whom it is addressed. The data were then analysed using qualitative content analysis.¹⁶ I used a deductive categorisation effort, which analyses the interview material according to previously developed, theoretically justified and clearly defined categories deduced from the guiding theoretical research interest (citizen–police interactions). As the incidence of a particular narrative is an indicator for its dominance within a given social context, the findings were quantified (counted).¹⁷ This step formed the basis for the eventual interpretation of the interview material.

It is recognised that, as with all qualitative research, this approach does not meet the criteria of representativeness in a strict quantitative sense. Moreover, it is an interpretative research strategy that relies heavily upon the ex post subjective understanding of social processes and events by those actors participating in them. Nevertheless, I decided to work with this approach for analytical as well as practical reasons. Firstly, and probably most importantly, citizen–police interactions, in particular their more informal, dark and violent dimensions, are difficult to observe through first-hand observation. For example, few police officers, if any, would dare extort a local resident or accept a bribe in front of a (foreign, white, male) researcher. In this regard, information about these processes has to be obtained through other methodological approaches, and qualitative expert interviews are particularly helpful for gaining in-depth insights into processes and underlying patterns of citizen–police interaction. By 'teasing out the subject's own understanding of events', these interviews are particularly well suited to uncovering decisively emic understandings of citizen–police relations and the way people make sense of them.¹⁸

Secondly, there were practical reasons for following this methodological approach. The study of Iztapalapa formed part of a larger comparative research project.¹⁹ While acknowledging the merits of in-depth ethnography, this

¹⁵ Adele E. Clarke, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), p. xxxv.

¹⁶ Philipp Mayring, *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlage und Techniken* (Weinheim: Beltz, 2008).

¹⁷ Philipp Mayring, 'Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1: 2 (2000), p. 5, available at <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0002204>.

¹⁸ Mike Maguire, 'Crime Statistics, Patterns and Trends: Changing Perceptions and Their Implications', in Mike Maguire, Rod Morgan and Robert Reiner (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* (Oxford, 1997), p. 180.

¹⁹ The research project compared patterns of security governance, citizen–police relations and the legal regulation of public security provision in Mexico City and Buenos Aires (see http://www.sfb-governance.de/en/teilprojekte/projekte/projektbereich_c/c3/index.html).

project, to paraphrase Caldeira, was not so much interested in ethnography of one particular area (or particular areas) in Iztapalapa.²⁰ Rather, its principal interest resided in a context-sensitive, and in this regard ethnographic, analysis of local residents' experiences with the police and their subjective understanding of citizen–police relations in different neighbourhoods throughout Iztapalapa. Whereas a comparative ethnography of these neighbourhoods and its triangulation with the results of the expert interviews would undeniably have offered even more in-depth insights into local citizen–police relations, limited access, available resources and time meant this type of research could not be conducted.

All interviews contributed to the analysis presented in this article, either as general background description or as direct extracts from the transcript. When transcribed interviews offered particularly 'rich' materials – by which I mean that these passages offered particularly in-depth descriptions of patterns and processes present in many other interviews – I decided to include passages as direct quotations. In this regard, the direct quotations are not exceptional with regard to the information they provide; rather, they stand out because of the pronounced way in which this information was placed and articulated in the respective narratives by the interviewee.

Policing Mexico City

In order to assess citizen–police relations in Iztapalapa, this section outlines the structural aspects of Mexico City policing. Although such larger structural aspects always unfold at the local level through place-specific mediation by idiosyncratic features of the micro-level context, the latter do not operate beyond or outside the confines set by these more general relations. In other words, rather than simply being reproduced locally in a linear fashion, it is the place-specific articulation process of these more abstract relations with the decisively local socio-spatial practices that gives them their everyday coherence and presence at the micro level. An understanding of everyday, micro-level relations in Iztapalapa, therefore, requires a more general assessment of the basic parameters within which policing in Mexico City operates.

The origins of the basic aspects of contemporary Mexico City policing can be traced back to the highly contested nature of urban state formation in the post-revolutionary period, the closely related institutionalisation of an authoritarian state apparatus and the impact of industrialisation-led urbanisation.²¹ The intersection of these developments, in a circular process,

²⁰ Teresa R. P. Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 11.

²¹ Diane E. Davis, 'The Political and Economic Origins of Violence and Insecurity in Contemporary Latin America: Past Trajectories and Future Prospects', in Arias and

contributed to and was facilitated by the formation (and reproduction) of a fragmented police apparatus with a high degree of autonomy from the local government. Although, from a historical perspective, local policing can be described as political policing, the Mexico City government never exercised complete political control over the local police forces. Rather, as with Mexican policing in general, Mexico City policing operates on the basis of a mechanism which trades political loyalty for a high degree of relative institutional autonomy.²² As local political elites could never establish a tight grip over the police forces operating in the capital, a particular 'arrangement' emerged: local governments in need of political policing for the safeguarding of their political and developmental projects, but unable to reach deep inside the local police apparatuses, tolerated illegal, corrupt, extortive and abusive policing practices as long as the police complied with their political policing tasks.²³ This high degree of institutional autonomy of the local police facilitated the consolidation and perpetuation of a paralegal and informal police culture that dominates institutional practices and prevails over formal codes, laws, obligations and regulations.²⁴

At the street level, these factors manifest themselves in a variety of extralegal practices on the part of the local police forces, including the active involvement of police officers in criminal activities, the protection of illegal activities, and structural patterns of police abuse.²⁵ Although police abuse includes acts of torture, illegal detentions and police violence, it is most of all monetary and

Goldstein (eds.), *Violent Democracies*, pp. 35–49; and 'Undermining the Rule of Law: Democratization and the Dark Side of Police Reform in Mexico', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 48: 1 (2006), pp. 55–86.

²² Markus-Michael Müller, 'Regieren durch (Un)Sicherheit? Die Funktion der Polizei im Kontext beschränkter Staatlichkeit in Mexiko', *Peripherie: Zeitschrift für Politik und Ökonomie in der Dritten Welt*, 104 (2006), pp. 500–22; Ernesto López Portillo Vargas, 'The Police in Mexico: Political Functions and Needed Reforms', in John Bailey and Jorge Chabat (eds.), *Transnational Crime and Public Security: Challenges to Mexico and the United States* (San Diego, CA: Center for US–Mexican Studies, University of California, 2002), pp. 114–16.

²³ Markus-Michael Müller, *Public Security in the Negotiated State: Policing in Latin America and Beyond* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 80–1, 92–103; Beatriz Martínez de Murguía, *La policía en México: ¿orden social o criminalidad?* (Mexico City: Planeta, 1999), pp. 49–56.

²⁴ Elena Azaola, *Imagen y autoimagen de la policía de la Ciudad de México* (Mexico City: Ediciones Coyoacán, 2006); Claire Naval, *Irregularidades, abusos de poder y maltratos en el Distrito Federal: la relación de los agentes policiales y del Ministerio Público con la población* (Mexico City: Fundar, Centro de Análisis e Investigación, 2006).

²⁵ Elena Azaola Garrido and Ángel Ruiz Torres, 'Poder y abusos de poder entre la Policía Judicial de la Ciudad de México', *Iberoamericana*, 41 (2011), pp. 99–114; Carlos Silva, 'Police Abuse in Mexico City', in Wayne A. Cornelius and David A. Shirk (eds.), *Reforming the Administration of Justice in Mexico* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), pp. 175–94; Martínez de Murguía, *La policía en México*.

takes the form of corruption, notably extortion and bribery.²⁶ The visibility of these practices (in particular police corruption), people's personal experiences of them, and knowledge and rumours about them have made citizens highly sceptical about the impersonal and public character of local policing. Additionally, citizens have become aware of the structural possibility of 'appropriating' public security resources for their own personal interests, and through different monetary or non-monetary forms of bribery, they frequently resort to local police officers in order to resolve local security problems, thereby converting public police officers into private resources of conflict resolution, as well as into security guards protecting their private and/or commercial interests and properties.²⁷

While the aforementioned features of local policing are inseparable from the legacy of the post-revolutionary state formation process under the dominance of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), which ruled Mexico from 1929 until 2000 (from 1928 until 1997, PRI presidents directly appointed the head of government of Mexico City), the local repercussions of the Mexican democratisation process have not improved the situation. Rather, they have contributed to a fragmentation of policing-related patronage and rent-seeking structures, a development that has received further impetus from the internal factionalism of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD), which has governed Mexico City since 1997.²⁸ In a political context marked by internal factionalism and the centrality of security concerns for the local electorate, stemming from what Castillo calls the 'metropolisation of crime' that has affected Mexico City since the mid-1990s, the provision of public security has become a highly politicised issue and an important resource for inner-party rivalries in which different factions use public security resources, frequently on a clientelist basis, for enhancing political support and for safeguarding their (frequently competing) political projects.²⁹

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that even the recent experiments with 'international best practices' such as 'community policing' and 'zero tolerance policing' have had little impact on local practices. Both policing imports had a predominantly symbolic dimension and were over-determined by the deeper features of local policing. As a result, community

²⁶ Naval, *Irregularidades*.

²⁷ Davis, 'Political and Economic Origins', p. 49; Pablo Piccato, *A Historical Perspective on Crime in Twentieth-Century Mexico City* (San Diego, CA: Center for US–Mexican Studies, University of California, 2003), pp. 65–6; Wil Pansters and Hector Castillo Berthier, 'Mexico City', in Koonings and Kruijt (eds.), *Fractured Cities*, pp. 36–56.

²⁸ On policing and rent-seeking structures, see Davis, 'Political and Economic Origins', p. 50.

²⁹ José Castillo, 'After the Explosion', in Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic (eds.), *The Endless City* (London: Phaidon, 2008), p. 181.

policing resources in many cases ended up being appropriated through different collective and private actors at the neighbourhood level.³⁰ Similarly, the Mexican version of ‘zero tolerance policing’, which was accompanied by the enactment of a new law on civic culture and the introduction of arrest quotas for local police officers as part of a programme aimed at the ‘recovery of public spaces’, even expanded the corruption opportunities of police officers in downtown Mexico City, the area that was the principal focus of these efforts.³¹

Marginality and insecurity in Iztapalapa

Located in the south-east of Mexico City, Iztapalapa is home to about 1.8 million people (roughly 21 per cent of Mexico City’s population) and is one of the most marginalised of the city’s 16 boroughs. According to official data, about one-third of Iztapalapa’s residents live in conditions of ‘high marginality’ and another one-third in conditions of ‘medium marginality’.³² Additionally, about 35 per cent of the economically active population (including a large segment of under- and self-employed people) earn less than the official minimum wage.³³ In this regard, a report from the borough administration concluded that most of the local workforce is living ‘in a situation of poverty, marked by a high degree of marginality that manifests itself in malnutrition, the dissolution of families, violence, illness, addictive problems and illiteracy’.³⁴ To this picture of socio-economic marginality we must add a widespread lack or deficient quality of public infrastructure like water supply, health services and public schools.

Compared with these public infrastructure deficits, Iztapalapa’s public security infrastructure, at least in quantitative terms, seems quite good.

³⁰ Markus-Michael Müller, ‘Community Policing in Latin America: Lessons from Mexico City’, *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 88 (2010), pp. 27–30.

³¹ Anne Becker and Markus-Michael Müller, ‘Null Toleranz für Straßenprostitution? Altstadttaufwertung und die Kriminalisierung “unerwünschter” informeller Ökonomien in Mexiko Stadt’, in Paola Alfaro Alençon, Walter Alejandro Imilan and Lina María Sánchez (eds.), *Lateinamerikanische Stadt im Wandel: Zwischen lokaler Stadtgesellschaft und globalem Einfluss* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011), pp. 61–70.

³² The degree of marginality takes into account questions of education, income, patrimony of the household and quality of the dwelling. These are divided up into six indicators: residents aged 15 and over without junior high school degree; employed residents with a monthly work-related income up to two minimum wages; residences without a telephone; residences without ground lamination; residences without indoor tap water; and average number of people sharing a bedroom. Data taken from www.siege.df.gob.mx/copladet/index.html (no longer available).

³³ The current minimum wage is 52.59 Mexican pesos a day or 1,598.736 pesos a month, which is roughly US\$ 120.

³⁴ Delegación Iztapalapa (Dirección General de Desarrollo Social), ‘Reglas de Operación 2008’ (Mexico City: Delegación Iztapalapa, 2008), p. 3.

Iztapalapa has 14 agencies of the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Ministerio Público (MP), with 80 agents; and in 2006, some 2,871 Preventive Police officers – roughly 10 per cent of the agents of the Secretaría de Seguridad Pública del Distrito Federal (Mexico City Secretariat of Public Security, SSPDF) – were assigned to the borough. In addition, the borough administration is in charge of a local police force, the Policía Delegacional, composed of members of the Auxiliary Police, that can be contracted by the borough administrations in Mexico City and which is responsible for policing 40 of the 186 administrative units of the borough. Moreover, Iztapalapa has also seen the implementation of a variety of special operations and security programmes throughout the last couple of years.³⁵ Nonetheless, Iztapalapa has been seriously affected by the upsurge in crime which has haunted Mexico City since the mid-1990s. In absolute numbers, Iztapalapa ranks at the top of the local crime statistics. Although these statistics are highly unreliable and are marked by serious underreporting due to the lack of confidence in the local justice administration, they nonetheless indicate that crime and violence, ranging from petty theft to express kidnappings and organised criminal activity such as the resale of stolen goods and drug trafficking, have become central ingredients of the local insecurity panorama, seriously affecting the everyday life of local residents. However, the local security problems are not only the result of an increase in crime; they are intimately related to the activities of the local police, who were described by local residents in extremely negative terms. This perception is related to three factors: (1) negative everyday experiences with the local police, stemming from abusive police behaviour; (2) collaboration between police agents and criminal actors; and (3) the negative impact of politics on local policing.

The Local Police Forces in Practice

Due to frequent personal experiences with abusive and extortive police behaviour, local residents described routine policing in Iztapalapa as a largely predatory, money-driven and abusive activity. A dominant concern in this regard was the fact that police officers routinely search and harass people due to their physical appearance. For example, young people dressed in clothes indicating their belonging to a 'deviant culture' or residents wearing worn-out or dirty clothing were said to attract the attention of local police officers, who

³⁵ Secretaría de Seguridad Pública del Distrito Federal (SSPDF), 'Delegación Iztapalapa' (Mexico City: SSPDF, 2007); Verónica Gil Montes and Angélica Rosas Huerta, 'Seguridad pública en Iztapalapa: un acercamiento institucional' (Mexico City: Instituto Ciudadano de Estudios Sobre Inseguridad, 2005), available at www.icesi.org.mx/documentos/propuestas/iztapalapa_acercamiento_seguridad_publica.pdf.

regard them as potential ‘suspects’.³⁶ In the words of Carmen, a domestic worker: ‘Any young person they see with a tattoo or a piercing or whatever, they think he is a delinquent and they go give him problems.’³⁷ The notion of ‘problems’ not only implies simple police harassment – rather, such situations frequently serve as a pretext for police extortion, in many cases through the fabrication of evidence such as planting small amounts of drugs on their victims. In order to avoid such incidents leading to an arrest, the victim and/or their families are pressured to ‘collaborate’ with the police agents by offering them an adequate financial ‘reward’ for letting the ‘suspects’ go. As a result, most of the local residents perceived the everyday encounter with the local police forces as a dangerous situation, based on unequal relations of power, which always entails the potential of ending up in some form of abuse. These perceptions of fear and powerlessness, however, are not so much related to the actual exercise of physical violence by the local police, which is in fact a rather seldom (but nonetheless existent) outcome of such situations. It was more often the symbolic display of violence, expressed in the use and performance of intimidating behaviour and (body) language, which served as the principal resource for intimidating people and compelling them to ‘collaborate’.

Such income-driven predatory police behaviour also dominates routine law enforcement activities, as local law enforcement agents, in order to fulfil their everyday duties, always expect ‘something in return’. In particular, the MP, the first institution Mexicans encounter when they want to make a legal complaint, was described by local residents as a highly bureaucratic, unresponsive, unfriendly, time- and money-consuming institution that most people tried to avoid, seemingly at all costs. As Carlos, a 62-year-old janitor, summed up: ‘Well, the truth is that when I file a complaint [at the MP] because they have assaulted me, well, do you really think that they will investigate this issue? They never investigate. You file a complaint and then you go out and nothing will happen. Here you need money, money to make them start with the investigations.’

Although money-driven behaviour was the predominant form of police abuse reported by local residents, the interviewees also gave various examples of non-monetary cases of abuse. In these cases, the police abused their legal and coercive powers to intimidate people, or, as the following passage

³⁶ The policing of youth cultures is closely related to growing political concerns about ‘youth violence’ and ‘gangs’ in Mexico, which increasingly portray such aesthetic ‘deviance’ as a ‘security threat’. Héctor Castillo Berthier and Gareth A. Jones, ‘Mean Streets: Youth, Violence and Daily Life in Mexico City’, in Jones and Rodgers (eds.), *Youth Violence*, pp. 183–202.

³⁷ All names throughout this article are pseudonyms.

from an interview with Martha, a 50-year-old housewife, illustrates, punish them for complaining about irregular (and illegal) police practices:

A neighbour, the wife of a member of the Judicial Police, had a verbal fight with another neighbour who had recently gone through an operation. The children of the two were playing in the street and started fighting. Well, the neighbour who had recently received surgical treatment complained to the wife of the police officer, who informed her husband. So later the husband complained to the neighbour who had had the operation and my brother found out about it and tried to defend the neighbour. He told the cop not to shout at her because she wasn't even in a condition to leave the house. Well, a couple of days later the policeman beat up my brother to such an extent that he had to go to the hospital. Because we filed a complaint, a couple of days later some police officers went after my brother and they detained him just like that and took him to prison. It was like a kidnapping. Like everyone, I think that this man, well, he's more powerful, he abuses the power of his public office.

The widespread existence of practices in which police agents abuse the power of their public office for a variety of illegal purposes undermines a basic feature of the rule of law, which is its non-arbitrary and impersonal character. The latter, in turn, is an essential precondition for generating 'impersonal trust' in public institutions. Impersonal trust refers to patterns of interaction in which people trust public agents because they believe that the latter will act according to impersonal, formal-legal 'accountability constraints'.³⁸ Due to the observations presented so far, it comes as little surprise that the level of 'impersonal trust' generated by local policing is very low, if not absent. Residents of Iztapalapa expressed that they are highly sceptical about the existence of a rule of law in Mexico, and they openly question the impersonal and public basis of the local justice administration. Instead of imagining themselves as empowered legal subjects and citizens, their position vis-à-vis public authorities can be described as that of petitioners. The responsiveness of local police agents and public institutions towards their concerns depends not upon impartial impersonal legal-rational conduct but on residents' access to extralegal incentives, most of all money, but also social status and personal connections.

It is not only the fact that local police forces prey on local residents which impedes the generation of impersonal trust in local policing. The protection of criminal activities by the police and the impact of politics on local policing are equally damaging factors in this regard. The following two sections will address these issues.

³⁸ Philip Pettit, 'Republican Theory and Political Trust', in Valerie Braithwhite and Margaret Levi (eds.), *Trust and Governance* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003), pp. 297–8.

The local police–criminal nexus

As argued above, it is a common feature of policing in Mexico City that police officers protect and even actively participate in criminal activities. This also holds true for Iztapalapa. Local residents described many cases where, in return for monetary rewards, officers pass on confidential information about future police raids, turn a blind eye to criminal activities and guarantee the safety of criminals and their customers – these practices are key factors behind the growing penetration of illicit economic activities such as burglaries, the handling of stolen goods, kidnapping and extortion rings, as well as drug trafficking, into many neighbourhoods throughout Iztapalapa. In turn, this active collaboration and protection, which severely undermines the public image of the local police, relates back to the pattern of predatory, money-driven policing described in the previous section, as the ‘buying power’ of criminal actors and the possibility of ‘taxing’ criminal activities offer a more than welcome opportunity for police agents to generate additional income. The following two interview passages are illustrative in this regard. In the first, Juan, a local merchant from the market in Santa Cruz de Meyehualco – a location famous for the redistribution and sale of stolen goods – explains how the pattern of police protection of illegal market activities works:

In Santa Cruz de Meyehualco, all types of stolen goods are sold. At night, the trucks arrive and bring in the stolen goods. For example, you can see trailers from Liverpool or Palacio de Hierro . . . You have to be there between 1 a.m. and 5 a.m. At 5 a.m., everything begins, including police protection. They collaborate . . . When you arrive as a merchant and you don’t accept the police protection, they are going to rob you, and when you accept their protection, you are really protected and safe inside the borders of Iztapalapa. Beyond the borders of the borough, they can take everything you have away. You are ‘safe’, because the people from the market and the police protect you.

Patricia, another local merchant, who participated in the local commerce of stolen car parts, presented a closer view of how such forms of police protection occur and what costs they involve:

Patricia: I was there [at the market] every day, from nine in the morning until dark, with another shift until eight. It went well, but I was working.

Interviewer: It was just doing business with car parts?

Patricia: Yes, everything from the scrapyard, but some people sold stolen parts and others not. But they paid their rent to the police so that they could work. Yes, the police came and raided them and sent them away, but not very often.

Interviewer: It was the police?

Patricia: The Judicial Police.

Interviewer: When you say ‘rent’, you mean they came by every so often?

Patricia: Exactly.

Interviewer: For example, how much did you give?

Patricia: No, I didn't give them anything. Well, there was one time when I worked there, and it was 50,000 pesos a month.

Interviewer: Who paid it?

Patricia: Several people.

Interviewer: Collectively?

Patricia: No, individually. But we worked hard and earned more than 50,000.

Interviewer: What would the police do with so much money?

Patricia: Well, it wasn't just them. It was their upper ranks as well. It was all divided . . . It is what I have experienced. I am sure that it's true because out of 100, one police officer will listen to you. Otherwise they are the ones who will detain you without reason or fear. But in the end, it also depends on how you act. If you are rebellious, such things are going to happen to you.

The picture that emerges from these accounts confirms the dominant perceptions of local residents regarding the complicity of police agents in protecting and 'taxing' illicit economic activities. It also suggests that these relations have acquired a structural character, as the references to fixed monetary payments and the seemingly well-rehearsed and predictable patterns of police protection at the market in Santa Cruz de Meyehualco indicate.

While for many interviewees neither illegal economic activities nor their protection by local police agents were unproblematic, they were often tolerated and justified, sometimes even welcomed, as they contributed to the economic well-being of the interviewees' neighbourhoods and families. In contrast to such positive perceptions, one particular criminal activity, and its related police protection, was perceived as highly problematic and threatening to the local communities: drug trafficking.³⁹

Drug trafficking, in the form of an expanding local market for cocaine and synthetic drugs and the growth of clandestine drug-selling points (*tienditas*) throughout the borough, appeared in most interviews as the root cause of insecurity. Although the presence of drug trafficking is not a new phenomenon, it is thought to have worsened with the arrival of cocaine and synthetic drugs during the 1990s. There exists a dominant narrative of a 'golden age' when the borough was beautiful and, if not peaceful, substantially secure. The arrival of cocaine and synthetic drugs turned this golden age darker – the

³⁹ On the social dynamics of drug trafficking in Iztapalapa, see Carlos Alberto Zamudio Angles, 'Las redes del narcomenudeo: cómo se reproducen el consumo y el comercio de drogas ilícitas entre jóvenes de barrios marginados', unpubl. master's thesis, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico, 2007.

social dynamics in Iztapalapa changed, and drug trafficking contributed to growing insecurity and violence in the area. This change was on the one hand related to the growing number of consumers who were perceived as being in permanent need of easy money to pay for their drugs, or who behaved violently and aggressively when under the influence of drugs. On the other hand, the growing coercive potential and violence associated with drug traffickers rendered existing informal mechanisms of social control and conflict resolution inoperative and contributed to a growing sensation of powerlessness, fear and insecurity. In this regard, all local residents reported that they would prefer to 'ignore' this phenomenon or accept it as a fact of life – most of all because they fear violent retribution.

But it is not only the aggressiveness of drug users and the possibility of violent revenge from the local drug dealers that scares the interviewees. They also worry about the protection of the local drug trade by the police (and other public functionaries), who instead of confronting the drug dealers would prefer to protect and tax them.⁴⁰

Politics and policing

Another aspect that has a negative impact on policing in Iztapalapa stems from the politicisation of local law enforcement. Local residents felt especially aggrieved at the neglect of the Mexico City police authorities who were perceived as paying more attention to the protection of wealthier neighbourhoods, tourist spaces and important political actors. These perceptions were also confirmed by members of the Mexico City police apparatus. For example, a former high-ranking police officer referred to the importance of maintaining the political support of the upper and middle classes for the local government, which otherwise, with its 'popular' political discourse, risks alienating the local middle and upper classes. This interest has contributed to a socio-economic bias in local policing. The ex-officer exemplified this by referencing the different quality of security provided by the local police for the residents of upper-class neighbourhoods such as Polanco, in contrast to the quality of public security provision in Iztapalapa:

Well, the state takes care of the people in Polanco. It's on the side of the businessmen and the politicians that live there as well. These are people who can conveniently access a high-ranking official of the SSPDF or of the government of the Federal District, people who have enough influence to make a phone call and say: 'Hey, what's going on in Polanco?' Things that don't happen in places like Iztapalapa, definitely not. An assault in Iztapalapa is not something very important for the government, but yes, it is very likely that a mugging in Polanco would prove worrisome for the government. It's sad, but that's just how it is – a reality which obviously reflects the

⁴⁰ Müller, *Public Security*, pp. 186–8.

relationships of classes between the rich and the poor. The people who don't have money are the people who have no protection, and the people with more money are the best protected.

This observation was echoed in the views of residents who stated that because many people living in Iztapalapa are poor, public authorities do not feel obligated to address their security concerns. This in turn was also identified as a principal cause of the unequal distribution of policing resources inside Iztapalapa, which privileges more powerful economic and political actors at the expense of more marginalised segments of the local population. In this regard, Martha, a local NGO member stated: 'When you go to Iztapalapa, you'll see ten police cars in front of the delegación, protecting the *delegado*, of course, and the barrios have no police patrol . . . We have an obvious problem with the distribution of police patrols. But when you ask the local authorities about this, they'll answer you with elusive replies.' The reasons for this selective distribution of public security resources, according to her experience, were 'political influences', which obviously favour actors with high levels of political capital, and tolerated corruption, 'which comes from above'. These 'political influences' are closely related to the internal factionalism within the PRD. It seems obvious that the distribution of security resources in Iztapalapa, in particular with respect to citizen participation programmes, is in many cases determined by party politics and the relationship between different factions of the PRD in the borough and the Mexico City government. In such a context, the responsiveness of public institutions does not depend upon impartial impersonal legal-rational conduct, but on political contacts, preferences, calculations and negotiations, leading to the selective distribution of public security provision and the privileging of people with good connections to the governing party/dominant local party faction.

A closely related problem is a form of 'security clientelism' in which different party factions use their access to public-security-related resources to distribute those resources among potential 'clients' for the purposes of building up or strengthening their own political support bases. As Denissen argues in her study on political clientelism in Iztapalapa, political brokers and politicians engaged in clientelist politics adapted to the changing needs of their clients under the conditions of Mexico City's post-PRI politics by expanding the spectrum of clientelist 'service' delivery.⁴¹ In light of the prevailing insecurity and violence in Iztapalapa, she points out, providing security has become a politically 'lucrative business' for clientelist politicians and political intermediaries. The underlying political logic and the exclusionary tendencies

⁴¹ Ingeborg Denissen, 'New Forms of Political Inclusion: Competitive Clientelism', in Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ed.), *Quality and Effectiveness: A Rich Menu for the Poor – Food for Thought on Effective Aid Policies* (The Hague: Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009), p. 420, available at www.minbuza.nl/en/appendices/key-topics/the-essays.html.

of these practices are well captured in the following interview passage from Julio, a 32-year-old self-employed merchant:

Well, this is a PRD neighbourhood, which is a left-wing party. So, many local politicians here are members of the local parliament. There are many people working for them as well, and because they are close to the PRD and because the government of the Federal District belongs to the PRD, there are obvious preferences. Here, they have always maintained these privileged relations, the tradition of having good connections to politicians or the police . . . But the normal people of course don't have this kind of personal access. They must always establish a personal relationship with someone and thereby strengthen [*reforzar*] this person's political career.

As this passage indicates, access to clientelist networks is uneven and hierarchical. Not everyone has the political or social capital necessary for a direct and unmediated relationship with local political authorities, so the participation of ordinary people in these relations and the opportunities for them to gain access to these informal processes of the distribution of public security resources are in most cases mediated through political brokers. This practice represents a crucial feature of the practices of informal political negotiations or *gestiones* that are central to (clientelist) politics in Mexico City: in exchange for the delivery of 'public' services or goods, local residents offer political support to people capable of providing these services. The brokers' political power is based on political capital derived from their capacity to mobilise people (and, eventually, votes). This capacity gives such brokers privileged access to state personnel and resources – including those related to public security – that can be appropriated to a certain degree for their private and political purposes and distributed across clientelist networks.⁴²

In this sense, local residents frequently referred to the *jefe/jefa de manzana* (block leader), whose privileged access to local politicians and the *delegación* was perceived as facilitating access to public resources (including public security resources) on the condition that potential beneficiaries are offering active political support and thereby strengthening the local brokers' political capital.⁴³ Asked what measures he took in order to tackle local security problems, Carlos noted:

Carlos: Well . . . the surveillance . . . There was one woman, the *jefa de manzana* . . . There is this person related to our block, who is in charge of all the problems. And later, this woman, [because of her.] well, they've sent more, well, they've put more security, they've assigned more patrol cars . . .

Interviewer: So would you say that this system of the *jefes de manzana* works?

⁴² Tina Hilgers, 'Causes and Consequences of Political Clientelism: Mexico's PRD in Comparative Perspective', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 50: 4 (2006), p. 137.

⁴³ Although the block leaders were abolished in the 1990s, many residents continue to refer to their successors, the representatives of the so-called neighbourhood committees, by this name.

Carlos: Yes, it's like a support system, because you go to her and she goes to the delegación. It is through her that many things have been accomplished here, in this part of the *colonia*.

Interviewer: And does she do it without receiving any gifts or the like?

Carlos: No, no, no, nothing. On the contrary, it's good for her, because she has support. If one day you want to help her in some case, you go and you give her your vote, your signature. And she says [to the local authorities]: 'You see, I have gotten together 100 signatures from different people whom I have helped, and now they are helping me.' That's how it works with her.

Although local residents were well aware that the existence of these structures contributes to a highly personalised, selective and uneven distribution of security resources, the structures themselves were perceived as positive and efficient in guaranteeing access to security-related 'public' resources, at least as long as one was able to participate in such clientelist networks. Hilgers' work on PRD clientelism in Mexico City is helpful for understanding these positive evaluations. She demonstrates that in light of the persisting incapacity of the local government to provide universally accessible public services (including public security), residents of marginalised neighbourhoods 'must choose between going without much-needed resources and using personal relationships with local politicians, operators and social leaders to obtain housing, services and work. Under these circumstances, the poor tend to consider patron-client exchanges a strategic mechanism for achieving physical and economic security.'⁴⁴ This implies that the 'positive' perceptions of clientelist relations held by local residents should not obscure the fact that, as in all clientelist relations, the immediate benefits can be extremely short-term and reserved for a circle of 'loyal' insiders. Nonetheless, in light of the contemporary socio-political environment in Mexico City and the absence of universally available infrastructure in Iztapalapa, being an 'insider' in such clientelist networks continues to be a promising option for the urban poor. Hence, patron-client exchanges survived the end of 'authoritarian clientelism' in Mexico City and continue to be part of the way in which survival problems are solved every day by the urban poor.⁴⁵ And in an increasingly insecure urban environment marked by decisively 'un-public' policing, this type of survival strategy has even expanded into the realm of 'public' security provision.

⁴⁴ Tina Hilgers, "Who is Using Whom?" Clientelism from the Client's Perspective', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, 15: 1 (2009), p. 51.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Fox, 'The Difficult Transition from Clientelism to Citizenship: Lessons from Mexico', *World Politics*, 46: 2 (1994), pp. 151-84.

The Ambivalence of Police–Citizen Relations

In light of these observations, it should be expected that local residents try to avoid or reduce direct contact with the local police whenever possible. This strategy would seem to confirm the argument recently put forward by Uildriks that there are no police–citizen relations in Mexico City and that ‘Police and public live in different worlds and, when they can avoid it, simply do not interact.’⁴⁶ This section will demonstrate that citizen–police relations are more complex and ambivalent than such statements suggest. In fact, although local policing seems to be overly discredited and a variety of security strategies ‘beyond the state’ exist – ranging from the purchase of a dog or weapon to the formation of neighbourhood watch networks – Iztapalapa residents continue to relate to the local police forces.⁴⁷ I propose that they do so because the forces’ privileged access to the state’s legal and coercive powers is perceived as a powerful resource for solving individual and/or collective security problems and conflicts. As a result, and depending on the specific problem to be addressed, local residents switch between different patterns of police involvement in security or conflict-related issues, contributing to the coexistence of informal and formal, public and private forms of citizen–police interaction.

A related pattern of citizen–police interaction is the widespread practice of informally appropriating and instrumentalising the police’s coercive powers for protection purposes. The preceding section explained how criminal actors buy protection from the local police, but such forms of informal police appropriation are not limited to actors involved in illicit activities. In fact, many residents described a variety of cases in which they – individually or as organised collectives of neighbours or merchants – donate money, food or drinks to local police agents in order to ‘establish good relations’ or ‘friendships’ with them. The creation of such ‘good relations’ is expected to establish some form of obligation on the part of the involved police officers to offer more protection, to pay greater attention and to demonstrate more responsiveness to the security needs of their ‘donors’ in cases of emergency. Such cases of local residents ‘buying’ police protection, it is important to stress, were described as voluntary acts. This indicates the continued relevance of the argument made long ago by Scott, that in assessing the issue of corruption, it is vital to differentiate between extortion and bribery. Whereas the first represents the coercion-backed demand of an illegal payment by a public official, the latter ‘refers to the use of more positive inducements’ from the

⁴⁶ Nils Uildriks, *Mexico’s Unruly of Law: Implementing Human Rights in Police and Judicial Reform under Democratization* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2010), p. 131.

⁴⁷ Ingeborg Denissen, ‘Grassroots Responses to Insecurity in Iztapalapa “El Traspacio de la Ciudad”’, paper presented at the 28th International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Rio de Janeiro, 11–14 June 2009.

bottom up.⁴⁸ The abstract notion of ‘police corruption’ that dominates research on Latin American policing makes this important distinction invisible, and it is a dimension which matters from the residents of Iztapalapa’s point of view. For them, the negative perception of local policing described above is in general related to ‘top-down’ extortive police behaviour. ‘Bottom-up’ bribery, in contrast, is not only widespread but also does not provoke any kind of moral condemnation or other negative judgements by local residents.

Another expression of such forms of private surveillance provided by the local police through informal channels of citizen–police interaction is the practice of ‘contracting’ policemen, who when off-duty offer protection services as local vigilantes, frequently to entire neighbourhoods. In such arrangements – which are illegal according to existing legislation, as police officers are not allowed to engage in private security provision – the neighbours either collect a certain amount of money, or the vigilantes go from door to door in order to ask for their payment. In return for payment, the vigilantes walk or drive around the area, frequently blowing a whistle, to indicate that the area is ‘under surveillance’. What converts these actors into attractive security providers is their assumed affiliation with the police, which is expected to guarantee an immediate response from the local authorities in the case of an emergency. Additionally, the common knowledge that the vigilantes could belong to the police is expected to provide a substantial deterrent potential, thereby indicating to potential criminals that it is ‘dangerous’ to prey on this neighbourhood.

In addition to such protection-related cases of informal police instrumentalisation, another informal pattern of citizen–police interaction can be observed. Interviewees referred to situations in which police officers were ‘bought’ in order to solve personal problems such as family conflicts or disputes with neighbours. The officers were bribed to intimidate ‘opponents’ or to ‘punish’ someone by using their coercive and/or legal faculties in favour of their ‘donor’s’ interests. The following interview passage is a good illustration of such a case. Here, 38-year-old Ramón describes how a controversy with his father involved the police due to his father’s desire to ‘teach him a lesson’:

I had a problem with my father . . . My father simply fell. He was hurt. An old wound reopened with his fall, and that is what most angered [him]. ‘I am going to call the police!’ ‘Call them! What are you going to accuse me of?’ ‘You can’t beat up old people.’ He wanted to see me in the prison cell, so he did it. He stopped there on Ermita [Road]. It took about an hour to stop a police car. I saw how he stopped it and

⁴⁸ James C. Scott, *Comparative Political Corruption* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 67.

began speaking to them. I saw that they stopped there at the tower. They parked backwards as it was dark. I saw my father get in and how they were discussing with him. It took about ten or 15 minutes. They were talking to see how much they were going to get out of him. I think my father wanted to teach me a lesson. I know he gave them some money.

All of these patterns of informal citizen–police interaction demonstrate that the features of the local police force, which local residents initially perceived as threatening and dangerous, are the principal reason why people (and in many cases the same interview partners) relate to them and use them for their private purposes. In particular, the ‘legal’ faculties and coercive powers of the police were perceived as important resources for (informally and illegally) resolving a variety of problems and conflicts. It was this privileged access to such resources, derived from the coercive powers of the state, which converted the police into the single most attractive actor within the local ‘protection business’.

Although informal practices of police instrumentalisation are predominant in such arrangements, there are also more formal-legal possibilities for instrumentalising the police. In particular, the transformation of a personal dispute into a legal problem, which then provokes police intervention, seems to be a privileged way through which local residents try to influence the outcome of a conflictive situation in their favour. In this regard, Antonia, a high-ranking member of the Attorney General’s Office of the Federal District, stated that the excessive workload of her institution is in part related to the fact that many people, in particular from boroughs such as Iztapalapa, try to convert personal problems into legal problems, frequently on the basis of false accusations, in order to provoke the intervention of the Judicial Police in the hopes that the ‘suspect’ will be arrested. In her view, there is an observable trend that in order to solve personal problems, ‘people are increasingly referring to the strongest manifestation of the state, which is the Penal Law’. This development was due to the profound *belief* in the efficiency of the Penal Law, which stems not so much from the impersonal character of the law as a medium of the regulation of social relations, but from the possibility of using the law as a ‘coercive’ instrument. The interview material from Iztapalapa, however, suggests that such patterns of the ‘judicialisation’ of conflicts are generally related to problems involving people from different neighbourhoods. Conflicts among residents of the same neighbourhood, or even the same street, are in general not ‘judicialised’, due to the assumption that such a move (including the possibility of a lawsuit and prison sentence) would only perpetuate the problem and create a permanent tension inside the community.

These observations illustrate once more the attractiveness of gaining access to the state’s coercive and legal powers for private ends. They confirm,

moreover, the observation made by Holston, in a different context, that the 'law itself is a means of manipulation, complication, stratagem, and violence by which all parties – public and private, dominant and dominated – further their interests'.⁴⁹ Therefore, even in an environment marked by the 'unrule of law' and the absence of impersonal trust in public institutions, the underprivileged, although situated at the margins of the formal legal system, strategically continue to use legal resources for furthering their personal interests by 'legal' means. Resorting to the law in these cases is not so much about obtaining formal-legal access to 'justice'; rather, it is about using the violence and sanction powers inherent in legal practices as a resource for resolving a conflictive situation in one's favour.

Aside from such cases of formal or informal police instrumentalisation, in which the police are converted into a private actor at the service of individual or collective interests, a final pattern of citizen–police interaction in Iztapalapa can be seen in cases where residents explicitly seek the help of the police as a *public*, impartial security provider, acting outside and above local interests. This situation was reported where the existing informal structures of social control, the resulting mechanisms of conflict resolution and the street-level disciplinary regimes stemming from dense levels of social cohesion at the neighbourhood level were unable to maintain 'order' in the neighbourhood in question. It relates to those forms of crime, violence or conflicts which local residents perceive as 'serious' and which have a potentially disrupting impact on local social relations. Faced with such situations, residents resort to the police in order to resolve these problems by externalising the related conflict (and its resolution), thereby declaring public institutions as the only responsible and legitimate authorities to address these issues. An illustrative and paradigmatic example can be found in the case of the territory governed by the left-wing political group, the Frente Popular Francisco Villa Independiente UNOPI (Francisco Villa Independent Popular Front UNOPI, FPFVI). Although this is an 'autonomous' space inside Iztapalapa – whose self-governance structure includes the question of security provision – which a member of the local justice administration has called a 'lost territory for the state', there are cases in which the administration of justice by the FPFVI encounters problems that cannot be resolved without the participation of the police as a public security provider.

The territory under the authority of the FPFVI was taken over by the organisation in 1994. It now comprises around eight hectares of land on which some 4,000 people live. The colonia provides housing and free infrastructure for its residents, including water and electricity, their

⁴⁹ James Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 203–4.

own school and even a community radio station. Additionally, the FPFVI has its own security structure, including permanent guards at the two main entrances of the colonia who check and question everyone wanting to enter. Each member of the FPFVI is obliged to do guard service once a month; people are organised into 28 brigades, and each brigade is responsible for one day of guard service. The daily shifts, always covered by at least five members of the respective brigade, are divided into three 'turns', from 6am to 2pm, from 2pm to 10pm, and the night shift from 10pm to 6pm. Besides the guard system, there is also an alarm whistle which can be used by all members in order to inform and mobilise the neighbourhood in cases of emergency, including those related to security. The following account from an interview with a member of the FPFVI provides some impression of how justice is administered in the colonia and identifies where this kind of administration of justice 'beyond the state' encounters its limits. Asked if there are instances in which the FPFVI is obliged to contact the authorities, Rosario responded:

Yes there are. When, for example, someone from the outside comes in and robs, he tries to steal a water tank or break into a house, so they get in, but the people stop them. So what do we do? One day they caught somebody and they took away his clothes and hung a sign on him that said 'I am a thief', and they took him on a walk all over the neighbourhood so that people could see that he was a thief. In some cases some of the guys will give him a few slaps in the face and throw him out, because the problem isn't very big. At one point there was another type of internal problem. For example, one of the *compañeros* raped a four-year-old girl, here inside. So the mother denounced him. The people were outraged by this. They beat him up, but we decided to hand him over to the police because in the end we can have our own rules. We can have a different vision [of justice], but there are some cases where we can't go beyond what exists, so the law that exists is the only one. The other option was to leave him at the hands of the people, and this would have generated a quite different situation. So what happened was that the police were called . . . We've called them, we said that we have this guy, that we will wait for them at the door; we handed the person over and they took him away. So there are questions like this. I don't know – for example, some youths are fighting in the doorway, they pull out guns and shoot at each other. In that case we don't expose ourselves either. What we do is keep the door closed and we call [the police] and say: 'This and this is happening. Come over here and solve it.'

As this interview passage demonstrates, informal security arrangements at the neighbourhood level become dependent on state resources in order to solve security problems or conflicts which are perceived as having a highly disruptive potential and/or whose resolution is beyond the capacities of micro-level security governance arrangements. In such cases, formal police involvement, through the related externalisation of the problem, contributes to the maintenance of the integrity and cohesion of social relations in the affected community.

Even in less dramatic cases of crime and insecurity, however, many interviewees stated that they would seek help from the police, notwithstanding negative personal experiences with them. The following exchange with 40-year-old Rodrigo illustrates this scenario. He was asked how he would describe the relationship between the neighbours and the police as an outside actor.

Rodrigo: With the police? There are no relations. Nobody wants to have them here. In reality, the only possible contact, the only possible relation we can have with them is when they arrest us [laughter]. For what do they serve at all? . . .

Interviewer: Whom would you contact when you are robbed in the street?

Rodrigo: When they assault me in the street? I have read that you call the police. No, let's be serious. In reality, it depends how serious it is. When I think it is something critical, I go to the police. When it is something not so serious, I think that I'll have to live with it.

Rodrigo's response is consistent with the view of many interviewees who would state initially that they and most local residents would not seek the assistance of the police, and would then describe them as a predominantly extortive, abusive and inefficient institution, but either in the course of the interview or when asked explicitly to whom they would turn after suffering a crime, would without hesitation mention the police as an actor from whom they would seek help. Such remarks cannot be taken at face value, of course, and we cannot establish a direct link between these abstract statements and actual patterns of behaviour. However, even without such generalisations, against the background of the observations presented so far, these statements have a high degree of plausibility. First, because interaction with the police in different formal and informal ways is indeed a permanent occurrence in Iztapalapa, the idea of turning to the police may not be as far-fetched in the local residents' perspective as much of the related literature on citizen–police relations in Latin America suggests. Second, and notwithstanding the fact that local residents frequently stated that their interactions with the police turn out to be a waste of time and money, the police, as a *public* institution, still seem to serve as a kind of last resort, a place where the security issues local residents consider 'serious' can be presented and sometimes even solved. This is what the case of the PPFVI illustrates from a more collective vantage point, and it is this same logic and underlying rationality which, I suggest, also gives plausibility to the statements of local residents that when the problem is 'something serious' or 'worth the effort', they would in fact seek the help of the police.

Conclusions

This article has aimed to move beyond the dominant perspective of the relationship between the urban poor and the police in contemporary Latin

America as one of mutual abandonment. From the vantage point of the marginalised Mexico City borough of Iztapalapa, it has demonstrated that far from abandoning corrupt and abusive police forces, the urban poor continue to interact with the police in formal and informal ways and even perceive them as efficient security actors, capable of offering protection and resolving conflicts – although not necessarily in public, formal-legal ways. The underlying rationale that explains this behaviour is that notwithstanding negative experiences, for the residents of Iztapalapa, formal and informal access to the police is access to (coercive and legal) state power – access which, in turn, can be translated into a powerful resource for resolving a variety of conflicts or security problems on their behalf.

These findings suggest that in contrast to the nearly exclusive emphasis other related studies have put on the privatisation of policing by economic and political powerful actors, ‘renting a cop’ is not solely the privilege of the rich and powerful.⁵⁰ Moreover, in analytical terms, they point towards the need to understand policing from a continuum-based perspective that moves beyond a static public–private divide by acknowledging the mediating role played by the intentional choices of citizens in determining the degree of publicness and (in)formality of policing in response to a particular problem. Through their intentional choices local residents play a central role in determining whether the local police forces operate as public actors or as private ‘rent-a-cops’, indicating that the (un-)public character of local policing comes equally ‘from above’ as it comes ‘from below’.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. Este artículo analiza las relaciones entre los ciudadanos y la policía en la delegación marginada de Iztapalapa en la Ciudad de México. El material demuestra que pese a las predominantemente negativas percepciones sobre experiencias con la policía, residentes locales no abandonan a las instituciones estatales como proveedoras de seguridad. El artículo asegura que en la medida que el acceso formal e informal a los poderes legales y coercitivos de la policía provee recursos importantes a residentes locales que necesitan resolver problemas de seguridad individual o colectiva, las fuerzas policíacas locales continúan siendo referidas e imaginadas como actores de seguridad relevantes.

Spanish keywords: policía, relaciones estado–sociedad, Ciudad de México, marginalidad urbana

⁵⁰ Enrique Desmond Arias, ‘Faith in our Neighbors: Networks and Social Order in Three Brazilian Favelas’, *Latin American Politics and Society*, 46: 1 (2006), pp. 3–4; Martha K. Huggins, ‘Urban Violence and Police Privatisation in Brazil: Blended Invisibility’, *Social Justice*, 27: 2 (2000), pp. 113–34.

Portuguese abstract. O artigo analisa as relações cidadão/polícia no bairro marginalizado de Iztapalapa, Cidade do México. Demonstra que apesar das percepções e experiências predominantemente negativas com relação à polícia, os residentes locais não abandonam as instituições estatais como provedoras de segurança. O artigo afirma que como o acesso formal e informal aos poderes legais e coercivos da polícia fornecem um recurso importante para moradores que necessitam resolver problemas de segurança individuais ou coletivos em seu favor, as polícias locais continuam a ser vistas e imaginadas como relevantes atores de segurança.

Portuguese keywords: Policiamento, relações estado/sociedade, Cidade do México, marginalidade urbana