

## Following the conflict: facts and analysis

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### The new surveillance by city quadrants improves security in the city. Could this be an opportunity for the new mayors?

**By: Follow-Up and Evaluation Project Team of the Colombian Police Force National Plan for Community Surveillance of City Quadrants\***

With local elections just around the corner, the debate on cities and public insecurity is now in the spotlight. The citizens' perception of security continues to decline, not only because they themselves or people close to them have been victims to a crime, but also because of conditions relating to social insecurity; financial uncertainty; government corruption; deterioration of public areas; difficulties getting from one place to another; the impact of the media, and the recent guerrilla attacks in Cauca, among many other factors, affect the citizens' sense of security.

Thus, it's no surprise that people are wondering, where are the police? What are they doing and how are they responding to violent actions and the reinforcement of criminal structures? What is being done to prevent and control both the petty crimes that affect people every day and the larger criminal structures? Where are the prevention programs of the mayors and other entities responsible for citizen security, integrating police and social intervention in the most conflicted areas?

In this context, the police force, as the main but not the only entity responsible for citizen security, is faced with the challenge of improving its effectiveness. This entails changing the way they work, coming up with more specific and organized activities and implementing preemptive interventions in close cooperation with local mayor offices, the communities and other public entities.

The response of the police to this complex situation led to the implementation of the National Plan for Community Surveillance of City Quadrants (Plan Nacional de Vigilancia Comunitaria por Cuadrantes -PNVCC), which aims at becoming increasingly at-

tuned to the community's expectations. This calls for a rapprochement, greater presence, permanence, immediate responses, comprehensive solutions to the issues of the different sectors, honesty and tangible results.

The implementation of the PNVCC has fostered significant changes within the police force. Recognition to the efforts made by the police force to organize the activities of each officer, assigning specific tasks and goals for each quadrant and officer accountable for the security of the well-defined areas of the cities nationwide is in order. Likewise, the police have been coordinating other areas and institutions with the purpose of becoming permanently involved with the community, encouraging their participation and social control.

Leaving behind the traditional police style, whereby they were called to react to take care of a situation to adopt a more preemptive, proactive style, with a work plan that responds to the specific problems of a city quadrant is a major task that demands adjustments in culture, competencies and police procedures, along with a technological development that will support detailed follow up and evaluation.

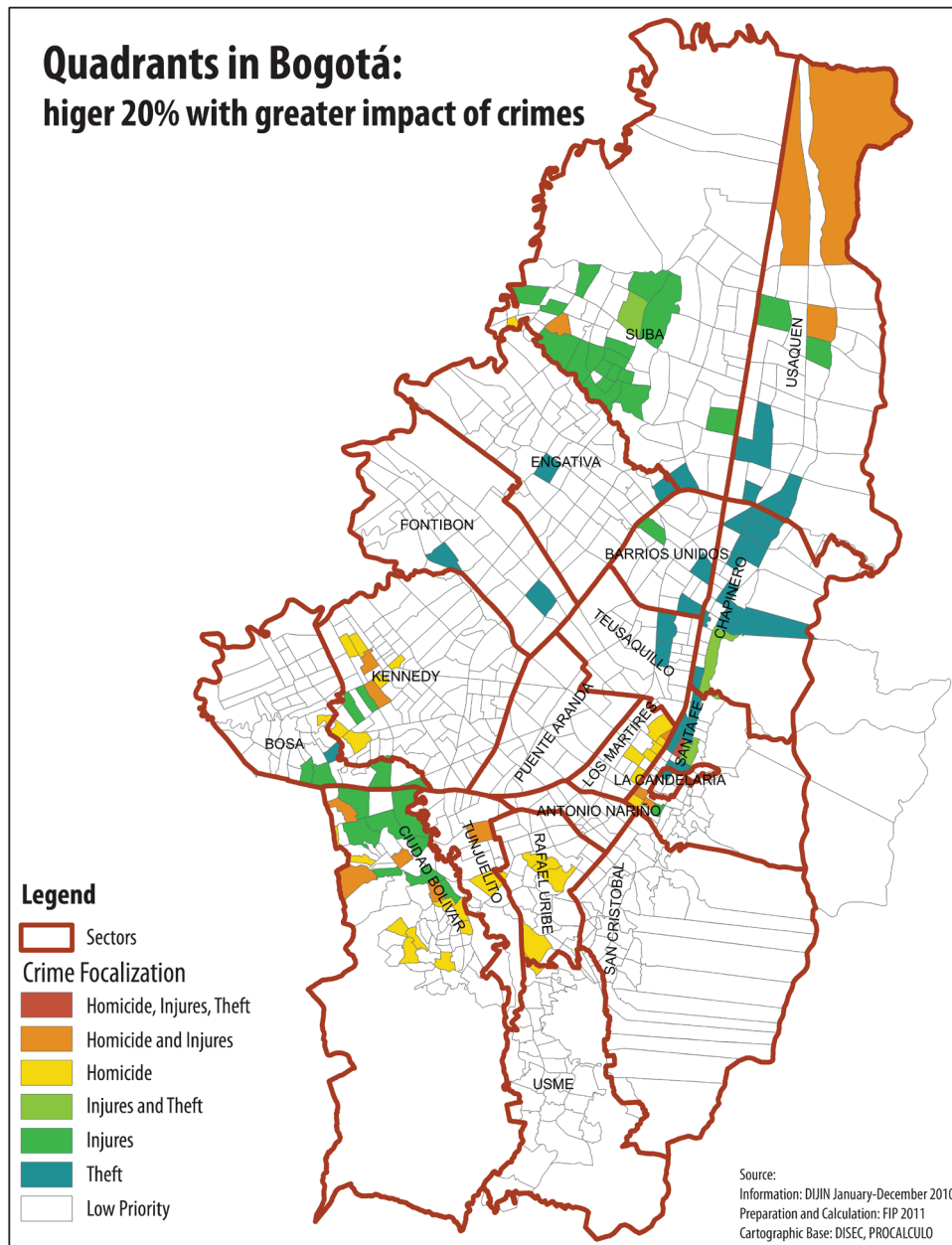
#### Analysis of the crime situation by city quadrants and the formulation of strategies.

The PNVCC subdivided the city into operational units called city quadrants. A quadrant is a geographic area comprising blocks that share similar characteristics, such as socioeconomic level, geographic location and type of economic activity, among others. Three patrol cars are assigned to each quadrant, 24 hours a day. Dividing the city in these quadrants has allowed observing in detail the individual crimes of each one, enabling the police force and the local authorities to identify the most relevant issues of each quadrant and thus design the most appropriate strategies to tackle these issues.

For instance, observing the crime-related figures for the last 12 months in Bogotá, it was possible to identify the most recurrent crimes in each of the 768 quadrants of the city. Pickpocketing/petty theft is the main issue in 633 quadrants of Bogotá (82% of the total quadrants in Bogotá), which would help explain the low security perception among the citizens, even though most of these crimes involve low sums.

Home burglary is the main issue in 105 quadrants (14% of the total quadrants in Bogotá). Car theft is the main problem in 65 quadrants (8% of the total). Homicide is the main crime in 52 city quadrants (7% of the total). And finally there is business burglary,

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which is the most recurrent crime in 33 quadrants in Bogotá (4% of the city quadrants).

As a part of the implementation process of the PNVCC, the police have started handling detailed and up-to-date information for each quadrant. This allows Security Councils to use this specific information as an analysis and decision-making tool regarding public investment in security. As evidenced in the map, it is possible to identify the quadrants with the most serious issues (higher 20%) among homicide, theft and injuries and where they occur in this same percentage at the same time.

Likewise, this data also allows observing the evolution of the most relevant criminal activities by quadrant. The average distribution of crimes throughout the quadrants in Bogotá remains all but

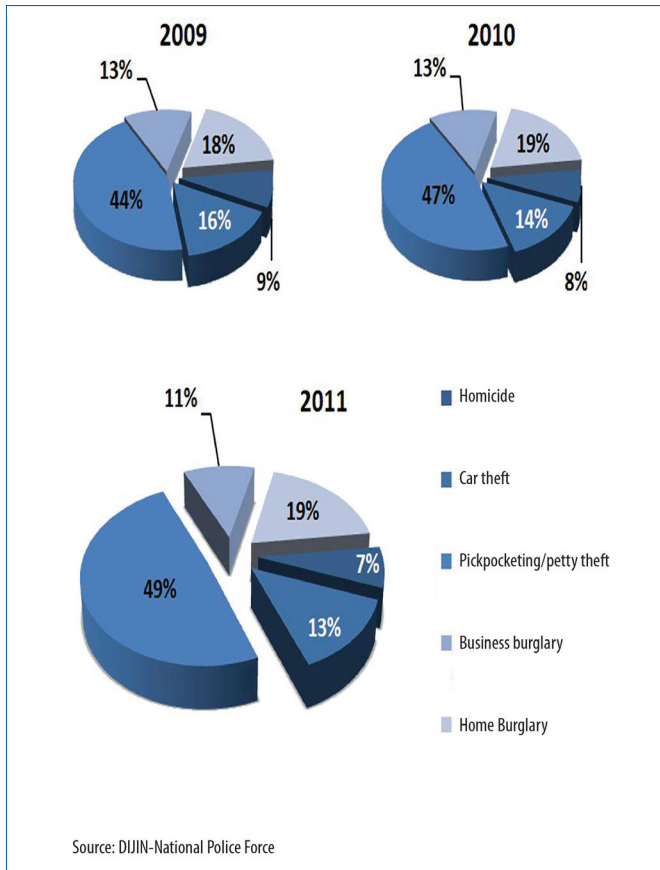
constant. The following chart shows the slight change in distribution of crimes by quadrant between 2009 and today. Pickpocketing/petty theft remains the most recurrent issue and has increased its part, while homicide is still the crime with the lowest occurrence and its percentage within the crime total continues to fall.

This type of data facilitates prioritizing and the definition of special instruments to control the most serious cases as a complement to the regular surveillance service of the PNVCC.

#### Strengthening the surveillance officers' competencies.

In order to improve the citizens' security conditions, more competent and engaged police officers are required: a technical officer that is able to react and get immediate backup in the occurrence

### EVOLUTION OF THE AVERAGE CRIME DISTRIBUTION BY QUADRANT IN BOGOTÁ



of a crime, but who is also able to plan his work ahead, set clear goals, work with the community and other entities to prevent crime and successfully handle the conflicts that arise each day.

This is why the police corps was forced to initiate a massive training process involving the entire surveillance staff of the 8 largest cities nationwide, initially. The purpose of the strategy entails the development of new competencies that will allow the police officers to prevent the commission of crimes in their quadrant, come up with coordinated strategies, recover the trust and regain legitimacy vis-à-vis the citizens.

#### External Follow-up and Evaluation.

Although the PNVC training and implementation processes are currently underway, the Fundación Ideas para la Paz -FIP-, as an external evaluator, has been conducting a detailed follow-up to determine whether this strategy has effectively allowed the police force to improve the security conditions that affect the main cities, and whether the citizens have been able to overcome their fear and their sense of insecurity regarding criminal actions.

#### An ongoing learning process.

The FIP has discovered that the police force's strategy has already overcome multiple stumbling blocks inherent to the com-

plexity and the scope of the proposed transformation. Some of them are related to the internal resistance, which is normal in these processes, strategic and technological adjustments, among others.

However, and although the institution and the citizens expect immediate results, it is essential to understand that the police force is undergoing a learning process that is crucial to the improvement of its performance; that this process takes time; that there are ups and downs; that it is not an even process in all cities, and that it produces variable results that depend on the behavior of the officers and the support of the communities and local administrations.

#### Has the Police Quadrant Plan had any impact?

The PNVC evaluation and monitoring process carried out by the FIP in the cities of Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Barranquilla, Cartagena, Bucaramanga, Cúcuta and Pereira has shown that the Police Stations in which the strategy has been properly implemented, that is, where the police officer of the quadrant has become closer to the community; there is a work plan; there is feedback and supervision on the part of his superiors, and there is coordination with the other local entities, security conditions have improved compared to the security conditions of the stations where implementation of the PNVC is less advanced.

Specifically, the stations comprising the highest 25% in the PNVC implementation level display a 20% average decrease in home burglaries, a 28% reduction in car theft, a 25% decrease in business burglaries and 62% reduction in fights<sup>1</sup>. In other words, the implementation of the PNVC entailing a rapprochement to the specific issues of the quadrants, and which serves as a guide for the planning of strategic responses to said issues, is now showing positive results regarding the reduction of crime-related indexes.

One of the most notorious findings of the FIP so far is the positive impact the change in the work style has had on crime prevention.

Although the PNVC has allowed increasing arrests and seizures by 4%, the overall crime reduction has averaged 11%. This is a clear indication that the prevention task of the quadrant police officers is creating a greater impact on criminal activities than traditional arrests and reactive tasks. This outcome is vital, as it highlights and confirms the preventive nature of the new strategy proposed by the PNVC in police actions.

#### Is the PNVC the right way?

The findings of the analysis conducted by the FIP to date allow observing that the implementation of the PNVC has started to show results. Said results suggest that a greater implementation of the Quadrant Plan would lead to an ongoing and constant improvement of security conditions. This should encourage the police to continue reinforcing the service planning process, carrying out more prevention activities that truly target the people's concerns and attacking the most entrenched problems that affect the quality of life and foster social disorder in major cities nationwide.

Even though a generalized impact is yet to be observed and will still take some time, it could be affirmed that the police force is on the right track. Furthermore, as the PNVCC continues to advance with the cooperation of the citizens and of the entities responsible for citizen security, it is possible to reduce the crime rate and for the citizens to start trusting the police again.

### What do the Mayors think of the PNVCC?

Despite the fact that the PNVCC's implementation is recent and that the current administrations are nearing the end of their term, the FIP was able to interview a few members of the Security Councils of the mentioned cities to get to know their opinion and about the relation of the local institutions with the PNVCC. Although the PNVCC has been positively appraised in general terms, the opinion of Mayors and Government Secretaries have been highlighted, since they have clearly identified the benefits of the Plan, as well as the challenges to be faced. These are just a few:

#### The PNVCC has changed the way of working with the Police.

Dividing the sectors in quadrants downsized the territory for which police actions are planned, thus allowing for the accurate identification of insecurity problems and the social, infrastructure and utilities factors, along with the presence of criminal groups, etc., which cause or foster the commission of crimes. The quadrant's patrol car must have a thorough knowledge of the happenings in the assigned area, who its inhabitants are, what type of businesses operate there, which public and private organizations work there, the presence of criminals, the most common crimes perpetrated and the *modus operandi* in the quadrant, among other basic aspects, to plan and organize an action plan with the main purpose of reducing the crime rate by preventing crime and reacting effectively to criminal actions.

#### The use of high-end technology in data management.

The data gathered is collected in digitized maps that allow for the combination of multiple variables associated to criminal activities and crimes. This has promoted joint analyses during the Security Councils or the coordination instances defined by the Mayor, which point the investment-related decisions of the municipal administrations towards the factors that may represent a more effective manner in which to prevent insecurity, e.g. fixing the lights in dark areas that facilitate the commission of crimes; covering the holes in streets where attacks are perpetrated taking advantage of the need to slow down, and the development of social programs preventing the creation of gangs or of illegal activities perpetrated by youngsters, among others.

#### Community Participation.

At the initiative of the police, certain sectors have been conducting analysis sessions with the participation of the community, the mayor's office and the police. These sessions foster the detection of the most significant problems, the definition of specific

solutions, and the assignment of roles and responsibilities to the municipal entities and quadrant patrol officers. These meetings not only focus on the joint work of the police and the local administration, but also promote the community's participation and facilitate social control.

#### Personalizing responsibilities.

Another factor the mayors have deemed positive is the permanence and identification with the full names and surnames of the quadrant patrol officers, in addition to the specific assignment of responsibilities related to the quadrant. Getting to know and informing the names of the quadrant patrol officers to the community, as well as the mobile phone number of the patrol car, has led to greater effectiveness in the responses, as well as the possibility of clearly identifying misconduct or ineffectiveness when dealing with the eradication of rooted problems or tackling minor issues that are sensitive to the quadrant.

In certain sectors, the police and the local administration have organized meetings to introduce the quadrant patrol officers to the community and for the officers to get to know the community in which they will be working. Likewise, the quadrant officers have taken it upon themselves to visit all the residences or businesses of the quadrants, meeting their owners or managers and leaving an adhesive card with their names and the mobile phone number of the quadrant and the CAI (Immediate Response Centers located in all neighborhoods citywide) when necessary.

According to the municipal authorities, this new police surveillance strategy is effectively bringing closer the police and the citizens and forging the citizens' trust in the quadrant officers. This has allowed the community to reinforce its cooperation by providing relevant information that has led to specific police actions and facilitating the intervention of other authorities accountable for citizen security in the quadrants.

#### The PNVCC's challenges

According to the Mayors and Secretaries interviewed, the PNVCC has yet to deal with two issues: first, insufficient staff. Most interviewees stated that more police officers are required in their city. The second is related to corruption control. To this purpose, they propose strengthening the recruitment, follow-up and disciplinary control mechanisms of the Institution.

### The New Mayors and the Quadrant Plan (PNVCC)

The new mayors have the chance, for the first time, to take office and find an ongoing police strategy, along with a new citizen security strategy and an upcoming coexistence strategy, which provides them with unprecedented tools to achieve specific results to improve the security conditions of their cities.

The consolidation of the PNVCC will require the true commitment of the mayors, as it is pivotal that inter-institutional coordination transcend to local levels in order to handle the concerns of the quadrants and find comprehensive solutions that bring together

all authorities involved to control crime and guarantee local security.

This is why the candidates to city mayor must become familiar with the new National Police Force surveillance strategy and come up with specific sectoral and inter-agency coordination strategies to facilitate the PNVCC's consolidation and reinforcement, so that decisions made regarding public investments may start by attacking the causes that lead to or foster insecurity as a priority of the new administrations.

The debates relating to citizen security must encompass the new operational strategy of the National Police Force. Considering the vital part played by municipal and regional governors in the new police work methodology, the PNVCC should be at the heart of the debate prior to the local elections to take place in October 2011. Likewise, the public opinion and the people must become active participants in the strategy's implementation process to achieve the level of citizen security to which we are all entitled.



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<sup>1</sup> Per 100.000 inhabitants.