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# The Transnational Circulation of Community Policing: the Neighborhood Watch Experience in São Paulo<sup>1</sup>

*A Circulação Transnacional do  
Policimento Comunitário: a Experiência  
do Programa Vizinhança Solidária  
em São Paulo*

*La circulación transnacional de la  
Policía Comunitaria: la experiencia de  
vigilancia vecinal en São Paulo*

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the transnational circulation of community policing models by reconstructing the genealogy of the Neighborhood Solidarity Program in São Paulo. Drawing on policy diffusion and genealogical approaches, it identifies how ideas, vocabularies, and institutional practices associated with community policing have traveled across borders and emerged in São Paulo's security landscape. Based on documentary analysis

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and interviews, it reveals how international influences are often obscured by claims of local authorship. It concludes that by tracing the multi-directional flows of policy circulation, the NSP can be understood as a pivotal node within broader networks of transnational security governance.

**Keywords:** Community Policing; Neighborhood Watch; Policy Diffusion; Transnational; Security Governance.

## Resumo

Este artigo investiga a circulação transnacional de modelos de policiamento comunitário, reconstruindo a genealogia do Programa Vizinhança Solidária em São Paulo. Com base em abordagens genealógicas e de difusão de políticas, identifica como ideias, vocabulários e práticas institucionais associadas ao policiamento comunitário atravessaram fronteiras e emergiram no cenário de segurança de São Paulo. Com base em análise documental e entrevistas, revela como as influências internacionais são frequentemente invisibilizadas por alegações de autoria local. Conclui que, ao traçar os fluxos multidirecionais da circulação de políticas, o programa pode ser compreendido como um ponto nodal em redes de governança transnacional da segurança.

**Palavras-chave:** Policiamento Comunitário; Vizinhança Solidária; Difusão de Políticas; Transnacional; Governança de Segurança.

## Resumen

Este artículo investiga la circulación transnacional de modelos de policía comunitaria, reconstruyendo la genealogía del Programa Barrio Solidario en São Paulo. Basándose en enfoques genealógicos y de difusión de políticas, identifica cómo las ideas, los vocabularios y las prácticas institucionales asociadas con la policía comunitaria cruzaron fronteras y surgieron en el panorama de seguridad de São Paulo. A partir del análisis documental y entrevistas, revela cómo las influencias internacionales quedan invisibilizadas tras las reivindicaciones de autoría local. Se concluye que, al rastrear los flujos multidireccionales de circulación de políticas, el programa puede entenderse como un punto nodal en las redes de gobernanza de seguridad transnacional.

**Palabras clave:** Policía Comunitaria; Barrio Solidario; Difusión de Políticas; Transnacional; Gobernanza de la seguridad.





## Introduction

The city of São Paulo is undergoing significant changes in its security governance, marked by new community actors and networks involving public and private stakeholders across different social sectors. In this context, the Neighborhood Solidarity Program<sup>4</sup> (NSP), implemented by the Military Police of the State of São Paulo (PMSP) in 2010, stands out as a local initiative that closely mirrors Neighborhood Watch programs, one of the core components of the broader community policing paradigm. Regarding conceptual foundations, aesthetic elements, and general structure, the NSP reflects this model, which has a long-standing tradition in the United States and is well established in countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada. Although this type of experience is relatively new to São Paulo, it has generated a set of continuities, adaptations, and innovations that are now influencing other cities in the Global South.

While the Neighborhood Solidarity Program (NSP) clearly draws on international models, the routes through which these influences arrived in Brazil remain opaque. This lack of clarity presents methodological challenges, as the diffusion process has been informal, non-linear, and frequently unacknowledged by its protagonists. In early interviews with key policymakers behind the NSP, most respondents portrayed it as a domestic innovation. Despite the evident similarities between the São Paulo initiative and other community policing programs worldwide, these actors neither recognized nor appeared willing to disclose any external inspiration. This apparent contradiction suggests that the NSP emerged from a complex assemblage of national and international elements. What makes this case particularly significant is the subtle way in which global interests and normative frameworks are absorbed and reinterpreted as local creativity, revealing a sophisticated configuration of international power. We argue that the circulation of community policing models over the past two to three decades has profoundly shaped São Paulo's security policy landscape, even if this influence did not take the form of a direct or formal transfer. This complexity motivates our inquiry into how transnational expertise in community policing has been rearticulated and operationalized in the São Paulo context.

At the same time, the São Paulo case reveals a degree of local experimentalism, suggesting that the military police exercised partial autonomy in adapting and reconfiguring international references. This locally driven innovation, however,

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4 Translated from the original name in Portuguese 'Programa Vizinhança Solidária'.





does not occur in isolation. As the NSP gained visibility, it began circulating beyond São Paulo, influencing community policing initiatives in other cities in Brazil and Latin America. Actors often perceive these South-South exchanges as more horizontal and collaborative, which further obscures the underlying power asymmetries embedded in global policy diffusion. We argue that this dynamic reinforces the apparent invisibility of international influence while positioning São Paulo and the state's military police as a pivotal node in a broader transnational network. The city thus operates simultaneously as a recipient and a diffuser of community policing models, functioning as both a landing and take-off point within the global circulation of security governance practices.

This paper seeks to explore the diffusion of ideas related to community policing in Brazil over the past decades, with particular attention to how they shaped the development of the NSP. To do so, we propose a four-phase analytical model: (1) the influence of international experiences, (2) local experiments, (3) translation and institutional adherence, and (4) international diffusion, which allows us to trace the program's transnational and domestic trajectory.

The community policing paradigm has gained significant global traction over the past three decades, garnering support across government institutions, civil society, and the media. A substantial body of literature has analyzed this trend (e.g., Brogden and Nijhar 2005; Malone and Dammert 2020; Frühling 2007; Dias Felix and Hilgers 2020), offering both reformist perspectives that portray community policing as a response to the limitations of traditional models (e.g., Goldstein 1990; Bailey 2001; Muggah 2016), and critical approaches that question its global diffusion and normative appeal as a one-size-fits-all solution (e.g., Ellison and Pino 2012; Brogden and Nijhar 2013).

In the Brazilian context, a growing number of scholars have examined community policing initiatives, often focusing on the contradictions between their reformist discourse and the persistence of violent, hierarchical police structures (e.g., Hinton 2009; Macaulay 2012; Soares 2019; Pires and Albernaz 2022). Yet only a limited number of studies explore the transnational trajectories through which these models are disseminated and reconfigured within Brazil (e.g., Vilarouca et.al. 2022; Ferreira, Rossoni, and Oliveira 2022; Peron and Alvarez 2021). This gap reflects a broader limitation in the field: while many contributions adopt comparative frameworks (e.g., Bailey 1994; Wisler and Onwudiwe 2009), few investigate the genealogies, actors, and mechanisms that drive the international circulation and localized appropriation of these policy models.





Although many studies adopt comparative frameworks to analyze community policing across different contexts (e.g., Bailey 1994; Wisler and Onwudiwe 2009), few of them engage with the subject from a truly international perspective that emphasizes how these experiences are interconnected through the global circulation of ideas, techniques, and institutional vocabularies (e.g., Ellison and Pino 2012). Moreover, limited attention has been paid to the actors involved in diffusion processes and the social spaces and mechanisms through which these policies circulate (e.g., Frühling 2007; Dias Felix and Hilgers 2020; Jones, Blaustein, and Newburn 2021). In light of these limitations, Oliveira and Faria (2017) argue that it is not enough to compare similarities and differences between policy models; instead, it is crucial to trace their genealogy and transnational trajectory, recognizing how territories become interlinked through dynamics of mutual learning, competition, and influence. In this sense, policy diffusion should not be understood as the mere transfer of technical solutions, but rather as a process deeply embedded in power relations that shape political decision-making and institutional reform (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Stone, Oliveira, and Pal 2020).

To address these dynamics analytically, this paper adopts the combined frameworks of policy diffusion and genealogy. This perspective is instrumental in identifying and interpreting the intricate mechanisms through which policies traverse borders, become anchored in specific local contexts, and later re-emerge as reference models for other settings (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Jones, Blaustein, and Newburn 2021). By mobilizing this transnational lens, the paper seeks to contribute to urban and community policing studies by capturing the broader movement and adaptation of political ideas across institutional and geographic boundaries. It emphasizes that diffusion is neither linear nor neutral, but marked by complex, bidirectional flows that reflect both local reinterpretations and the enduring influence of dominant global centers in defining what counts as “best practice” (Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett 2008; Go 2023).

A central methodological challenge lies in reconstructing the transnational genealogy of community policing while accounting for its local adaptations and appropriations. Rather than tracing a single point of origin for the Neighborhood Solidarity Program (NSP), the study adopts a genealogical perspective to uncover the historical and structural conditions that made its emergence possible (Foucault 1979). As this research suggests, the program is not the result of a linear transfer but a complex interplay of national and international, material and ideological influences. This approach makes it possible to uncover the underlying power





structures and the layered, historically sedimented processes of institutional development that are often obscured by analyses focused solely on the present.

To trace these layered influences and transnational linkages, the paper draws on a heterogeneous set of empirical materials, combining official documents produced by the Military Police of São Paulo with unstructured interviews conducted with key officers involved in formulating and promoting the NSP. Three stakeholders — a lieutenant colonel, a major, and a captain — were selected to provide insight into the program's conception and institutional dissemination, rather than its street-level implementation. This focus reflects an analytical concern with how narratives and discourses around community policing are produced and circulated by decision-makers, particularly those engaged in international exchanges through events, training programs, and cooperation networks (Ellison, Pino 2012).

Although these officers act as internal spokespersons for the NSP and have actively contributed to its diffusion nationally and abroad, they rarely acknowledge the international influences that helped shape the program. This silence requires a methodological strategy based on inference and triangulation to link broader transnational processes with individual trajectories and institutional developments. To complement the interviews and reveal dimensions that remain implicit in the actors' accounts, the analysis also incorporates documents from international organizations and NGOs, including training materials, project reports, and manuals, which circulate globally and promote best practices in community policing. These sources reinforce the paper's central argument and expose the tension between external influence and local authorship, offering a more nuanced understanding of the NSP's genealogy and its role in the transnational field of security governance.

The paper comprises two main sections. The first begins by briefly presenting the local contours of the NSP, detailing its programmatic content, territorial scope, target populations, and implementation strategies. In its core, this section provides a genealogical reconstruction of the international experiences that influenced the NSP emergence, situating São Paulo within broader transnational policy flows. The second section analyzes the subsequent diffusion of the NSP model to other national and international contexts, emphasizing the role of key actors and mechanisms in promoting the program as an example of best practice. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the paper's contributions and suggests directions for future research on the transnational dynamics of community policing.





## The genealogy of international experiences in São Paulo's community policing initiatives

The *Vizinhança Solidária* (Solidarity Neighborhood) program, implemented by the Military Police of São Paulo (PMSP), focuses on improving public security through the active participation of residents in cooperation with law enforcement. The program was initially conceived to meet the demands of specific segments of society, particularly in middle-class residential neighborhoods and commercial districts. The program operates through virtual groups — primarily hosted on platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp — that bring together residents from a specific neighborhood and at least one representative from the local police battalion. These groups serve as a communication tool, allowing neighbors and the police to exchange security-related information. Residents are encouraged to report suspicious activities, share updates on local crime trends, and discuss safety practices. The police use these platforms to provide essential information about crime prevention strategies, emergency procedures, and community safety initiatives. Officers also serve as guides, offering advice and instructions on how the community can reduce crime and improve overall neighborhood safety.

Initially, the program found success in dense middle-class neighborhoods especially in apartment buildings, where condominium associations were already in place, and in commercial districts where shopkeepers coordinated efforts to ensure the safety of local businesses. Over time, the program has expanded, adapting to various urban environments and fostering a sense of collective responsibility for maintaining security.

As NSP has garnered attention, the program encompasses small towns and the peripheral neighborhoods of large cities. In some places, residents have taken the initiative to organize themselves and approach the PMSP, while in others, the police have proactively fostered groups and identified community leaders. Communities with organized NSP groups often display signs and banners akin to American neighborhood watch initiatives, signaling the presence of community surveillance. Although this is not a comparative study, our research problem emerged from the program's emblems, which emulate other international experiences. The sources highlight that the program has instituted mechanisms to heighten citizen awareness of risks and contribute to improving the public's perception of the police. Finally, a police major also pointed out that the NSP establishes channels for the police to generate information and intelligence.





The PMSP has pioneered the implementation of community policing experiences in Brazil. This process results from influences from international cooperation projects and authorial experiences developed by specific leaders. A central point to this paper is tensioning the stakeholder's claims that the program is native from São Paulo. Community policing formulation, particularly the NSP, can be interpreted by locals in terms of a bottom-up movement, while in fact also being the result of top-down international hierarchical relations.

To characterize Phase 1, *the influence of international experiences*, it is important to define the moment before the NSP was implemented in 2010. This is a central part of a genealogical effort, as it situates the disputes between concurring policing paradigms as well as the intricate transnational streams of policing models.

The community policing paradigm emerged in the 1960s in the United States amid a growing mistrust between the police and urban communities, which stimulated discussions about the need for more collaborative approaches to fighting crime (Manning and Mahendra 1997). As Greene (2000, 301) states, community policing has become the “national mantra of American police.” As such, this idea has been incorporated into international police assistance and training programs, making the United States the most influential diffuser of this model, particularly in Latin America (Skogan, Hartnett 1997). Since this is the case, this paper focuses mainly on the United States' role in this policy circulation. However, despite the term's origins in the United States, the community policing paradigm has also been adopted and adapted in other territories, which have developed their own experiences and, over time, become international references and diffusers of the model, such as the United Kingdom, Japan or Canada (Wolff 2019). These adaptations often reframed the paradigm to suit local contexts while aligning with its core principles. Specifically, the United States, Canada and Japan, have been mentioned as stakeholders by this paper's sources.

The definition of community policing is not precise since its meaning has become elastic over time. A comprehensive characterization recognized by the literature describes this policy model as “full-service personalized policing where the same officer patrols and works in the same area permanently from a decentralized place, working in a proactive partnership with citizens to identify and solve problems” (Trojanowicz and Bucqueroux 1990, 3). The policy aims to decentralize administration, enhance organizational responsiveness, engage community safety projects, and adopt a problem-solving orientation. The





community defines local priorities through multiple forms of representation, legitimizing the police's role in resolving issues (Dias Felix and Hilgers 2020).

Over the past three decades, the community policing paradigm has garnered global recognition as a panacea for critical police issues (Ellison and Pino 2012). Many actors, including government agencies, multilateral organizations, private corporations, and NGOs, have supported its global diffusion as a “best solution,” offering training, assistance, and incentives (Soares 2019). It is often defined as a “philosophy” resulting in various local interpretations (e.g., Bureau of Justice Assistance 2005; PMSP 2016). Among these is the Neighborhood Watch model, which involves residents actively cooperating with law enforcement and each other to enhance community safety by monitoring, reporting suspicious activities, and taking preventative measures (Skogan and Hartnett 1997; Bennett, Holloway and Farrington 2008).

As has been the case since its local origin, community policing lived side by side with its counterpart model, focused on the proliferation of rhetoric and practices associated with *wars* on crime, drugs, and terrorism, accompanied by broader trends of militarization, police brutality, and mass incarceration (Wacquant 2009). Both models have been the object of transnational diffusion. The United States emerged as a dual reference point, serving both as a model for zero-tolerance policing and as a promoter of community policing strategies. Over the course of two decades, American law enforcement agencies provided specialized training and facilitated exchange programs, fostering the transfer of knowledge, tactics, and operational frameworks between U.S. and Brazilian police forces (USA 2010–2017). That highlights the coexistence and tension between prevention-oriented reforms and repressive measures within global policing paradigms.

Specifically, regarding community policing, the United States has played a singular role in shaping police reform in Latin America, actively leading the development of training programs and organizing global conferences for law enforcement officials to influence international reforms and security agendas (Ellison, Pino 2012). Local police forces in the region have undergone significant transformations through targeted American assistance and training programs. Community policing has been a central focus of U.S. police training initiatives in Brazil since the early 2000s (US Department of State 2000-1017). This transnational influence is channeled both through state and non-state institutions, as well as multilateral donors.





USAID has been a strategic part of these efforts. Its publications map successful replicable experiences in partner countries and promote the emulation and learning of effective practices through detailed descriptions (Secretaria de Governacion de Mexico and US Aid 2015; Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos 2013). Their aim is to press on other nations to adopt similar models and foster a competitive environment. This mechanism aligns with research findings, as a military police captain reported that engagement with the NSP has led to career advancements, including promotions and opportunities to become instructors nationally and internationally. Among them, the publications “Policía Comunitaria: conceptos, métodos y escenarios de aplicación” (Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humano 2013) and “Manual de capacitación de policía comunitaria y metodología para solución de problemas” (Secretaria de Governacion de Mexico and US Aid 2015) stand out.

Similarly, significant intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations have presented theoretical concepts and operational actions. Important intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations replicate this practice, as evidenced by the instances of “Tackling Urban Violence in Latin America: Reversing Exclusion through Smart Policing and Social Investment” (Wola 2011), “What Can be Learned from Brazil’s ‘Pacification’ Police Model?” (Wola 2016), “Making Cities Safer: Citizen Security Innovations from Latin America” (Muggah et al. 2016), “A Polícia que Dá Certo: Experiências Vencedoras do Prêmio Polícia Cidadã” (Sou da Paz, 2019), “Relatório sobre Segurança Cidadã e Direitos Humanos” (OEA 2009), “Handbook on the Crime Prevention Guidelines: Making Them Work” (UN 2010), and “Policing Urban Spaces” (UN 2011). Many of these publications map Brazilian experiences (e.g., Programa para la Convivencia Ciudadana 2002, Muggah et al. 2016; UN 2010), selecting key milestones, most relevant cases, and successful experiences, consolidating a strong and globally disseminated discourse about Brazil.

Multilateral donors, such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank<sup>5</sup>, have also supported international initiatives to promote community policing in Latin America, often making such reforms a condition for foreign aid (Murphy 2007). These actors position the region as a key area for exporting policing standards from developed countries (Brogden and Nijhar 2005). The São Paulo case exemplifies the broader Latin American experience,

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5 One prominent example of community policing funded by BID is the Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora (UPP) in Rio de Janeiro, launched in 2008 (O Globo, 2012).





where economic incentives are linked to police reform, creating a dynamic of coercion and competition among nations for development opportunities and international recognition (Carrión 2007).

Despite the considerable financial investments associated with the diffusion of community policing concepts, scant attention has been paid to systematically assessing their outcomes and efficacy (Ellison and Pino 2012). As per Brogden (2002), it is also crucial to recognize that the diffusion process within the community policing paradigm is not impartial. Donors from developed countries exhibit a pronounced affinity for community policing solutions, driven by the assumption that Western countries' development path is the correct paradigm. Proponents for this approach argue that adopting Western models engenders stability, enhances security, and contributes to establishing favorable social orders. It should be noted that this dynamic is characterized by a significant asymmetry of power between donors and recipients.

Local conditions contribute to a nuanced reinterpretation of community policing by integrating knowledge, institutional history, actor characteristics, constituent processes, and context-specific challenges. These translated experiences often evolve into newly successful acclaimed models, which are recurrently re-diffused transnationally. This intricate process involves a three-part sequence: (1) global diffusion and circulation, (2) local translation and adaptation, and (3) rediffusion and global circulation<sup>6</sup>, as outlined by Dias Felix and Hilgers (2020). The concept of translation means acknowledging that a policy is not merely replicated from one location to another; instead, it undergoes a process of appropriation and modification — and, in some instances, even distortion — by local formulators and implementing agents (Oliveira 2021). Across Latin America, a complex interplay exists between adopting *tough on crime* approaches and implementing community policing, both influenced by Western donors. The region grapples with a historical legacy marked by a repressive approach and instances of police brutality. This dynamic is evident in the coexistence of sporadic community policing initiatives with entrenched, hierarchically structured, and militarized police forces operating within an authoritarian public security paradigm, notably in countries like Brazil.

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<sup>6</sup> Thus, this process reveals a growing trend of South-South cooperation among community policing experiences in Latin America. Brazil has learned from some of these experiences and has become a key diffuser, as the NSP exemplifies. However, it is essential to recognize that this notion of South-South cooperation often masks the underlying hierarchies and power dynamics that continue to shape the flow of knowledge and practices.





Although the whole process of incorporating community policing to São Paulo does not have a clear starting point, as it is usual in a genealogical process, police officers indicate that the change in policing mentality in the State of São Paulo dates to the return to democracy after the military dictatorship. In particular, police officers directly involved in formulating the NSP identify the Community Security Councils (CONSEGs) creation in 1985 by the state's first democratically elected government as the impetus for bringing police and communities closer together — a development internationally recognized as a significant advancement in citizen security (Wola 2013).

CONSEGs are municipal or regional councils (in the case of large municipalities) that bring civil and military police together with civil society representatives to discuss and monitor security policies. In their monthly meetings, the regional PMSP commander and the chief police officer receive complaints and suggestions from local representatives. They also use this space to instruct the residents about *primary prevention*, which targets factors that induce crime. Through CONSEGs, police officers identified society's demands for projects to bring policing closer to communities, such as the NSP.

It is important to emphasize that the demands for police reform are not only international, but also the result of demands from local civil society. Violent police incidents domestically and internationally spurred civil society demands for police reform aligned with community policing principles. Deteriorating police-community relations and stigmatization led to support for reform within police organizations, aiming to restore legitimacy based on new democratic foundations (FBSP 2021).

Alleged successful experiences learned and translated in Latin America also circulated within the region, experiencing similar contexts and challenges. Caparroz (2019) indicates that the Community Police Units of Ecuador's national police (PNE) informed the creation of the NSP in the city of Santo André (São Paulo). According to Pontón (2017), the reformulation of the PNE under the Rafael Correa administration incorporated guidelines for implementing community policing. In turn, the Ecuadorian police reform was based on practices adopted by Colombia's national police, which, during this period, received large amounts of international funds for investment in policing, particularly within Plan Colombia, influenced by American experiences and police assistance programs, as well as cooperation projects with Japan, for example (Caparroz 2019). This complex transnational trail shows how the United States' influence in the process tends to disappear as soon as the circulation apparently becomes Latin-American.





The PMSP states that their first community policing initiatives were inspired by the Canadian model in the 1990s (PMSP 2016). In this case, heterogeneous diffusion actors were involved, including civil society organizations, universities, and the police. Based on an initiative by the São Paulo Institute against Violence (ISPCV), a civil society organization, PMSP acquired teaching materials and documentaries that shared experiences from Canadian cities. The PMSP Director of Education, Nilton Divino D’addio, stated that “this [Canadian] video will be used to instruct and train our police officers” (FSP 1998). In the same period, an agreement was established between the University of São Paulo’s Center for the Study of Violence (NEV) and the University of Ottawa’s Center for Education and Research in Human Rights (HRREC) to study both police forces and exchange knowledge and techniques on policing, in addition to fostering dialogue and support for public authorities in São Paulo (NEV 1998).

PMSP also cites Japan as a relevant reference in community policing. In 2005, a partnership was formed with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to promote the dissemination, learning, and translation of the Japanese model to the Brazilian reality. The *Community Police Project* encompassed training opportunities in Japan and Brazil for *multipliers*, those police officers who received scholarships and were responsible for disseminating the knowledge acquired internally in their forces (JICA 2008). The organization of seminars and training is typically an interesting and low-cost strategy through which the diffusing actors create an environment for police officers from different parts of the world to socialize and promote the dissemination of a wide range of knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

As we have seen, the conditions for the emergence of a policy such as the NSP take place over a long period of time, as a result of multiple influences. At no time did the interviewees refer to most of the documents discussed. On the contrary, as previously stated, local stakeholders interpret the process as a native innovation. This process of concealment is a strategic tool of power, which will be strengthened as Brazilian experiences become, in turn, elements of international dissemination. In the next stage, the experiences of the USA, Canada or Japan will no longer appear, but rather models adapted to the Latin American reality.

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<sup>7</sup> Although the Koban policing model is often cited by the sources, it represents a different kind of proximity policing program. The model is based on small urban police stations, which are used for both patrol and preventive action. In São Paulo, the program was adapted to use mobile bases, police vans that serve the same purpose, but with the ability to relocate, relying mainly on intelligence work, such as georeferencing of criminal occurrences (JICA 2010)





## Consolidating NSP — São Paulo as an intermediary point in community policing circulation

In face of the long process priorly described, Phase 2, which we call *local experiments*, emerges as the development itself of the NSP. The program was created in 2010 and implemented for the first time by the Metropolitan Area Six Police Command in the southeastern part of Greater São Paulo, particularly in the Jardim Bom Pastor neighborhood of Santo André. Captain Temístocles Telmo Ferreira Araújo formulated the program to bring the police closer to residents and businesspeople in certain regions (which varied from street blocks, parts of neighborhoods, entire neighborhoods, to even whole municipalities in smaller cities).

At first, after meetings at the Santo André CONSEG, community representatives demanded greater community involvement in crime-fighting. From there, the regional police command mapped the streets and regions with the highest crime rates, and the program was first implemented among the region's store owners.

The NSP arose from two important influences that explain the transformation in local policing. First, there was the impact of *hot spot policing* logic and georeferencing in policing. Despite not being the focus of this paper, we would like to note the importance of researching how this practice, including the technological material accompanying its installation, was incorporated into local policing (Peron and Alvarez 2021). Secondly, and of central importance to this study, the research shows the influences of what is conventionally called community policing in Latin America, including concepts of the American Neighborhood Watch models, European proximity policing, and components of the Japanese Koban model, which were already established through cooperation with the PMSP (Ribeiro, Oliveira and Diniz 2016). This experiment reflects a certain degree of autonomy of the military police regional commanders in formulating experimental projects, with some degree of authorship. Although there are general police guidelines for community policing, there is no specific definition of how these initiatives should be conducted in each battalion. We infer from the collected reports that the influences and values of each of the commanders have an important impact on operationalizing the concepts of community policing.

A notable dispute over project authorship arose when police forces adopted community policing programs. This research exemplifies this when the leading police officers assert innovation without acknowledging its evident transnational





influence, even though international experiences have been circulating in Brazil for decades. Both the major and the lieutenant colonel consulted for this research could mention international influence but were categorical in stressing the program's innovation. Conversely, the captain highlights its innovative potential for international diffusion, a dimension that enhances the recognition and prestige of their work and that of their team. The unclear origins of the policy remain, with its often-contested authorship adding further complexity to its proper assimilation within the Brazilian context.

Police officers, politicians, and specialists in Brazilian security recurrently stress the complications characteristic of the Brazilian urban context compared to the conditions in most developed countries. According to Colonel Carlos Alberto de Camargo (PMSP),

Concerning projects already implemented in other countries, such as Canadian, American, and English cities, it was clear at that moment that they referred to models that sought a good relationship between the police and the community in places without major social problems and where any project could hardly go wrong. This became clear in 1998 during the International Congress on Community Policing in The Hague. At the time, police chiefs from cities around the world where projects had already been implemented were astonished when they became aware of the conditions in Brazil that the population of their towns was many times smaller than the number of unemployed people in the City of São Paulo (Camargo 2015, 228).

Ellen Pontes Silva de Freitas, a first lieutenant of the Military Police in Acre, who participated in the Japanese community policing international program, shared similar thoughts. To her,

[I]t was perceptible that a differentiating factor in Japan regarding the community's approximation in relation to Brazil is that the Brazilian population is wary of cooperation with the police in the wake of the military dictatorship, and people often see the police force as being more concerned with promoting violence to maintain order than protecting the rights of its citizens (JICA 2010, 1).

Both quotes state challenges and obstacles to the learning, translating, and institutionalization processes regarding international models in circulation. On the other hand, it shows how local police officers stress Brazil's peculiar





conditions as an innovation driver. As noted, these processes are non-linear but are instead marked by advances and setbacks in various national and local contexts over the years. Despite these controversies, this model has prevailed among international donors, including Brazil, who have kept diffusing and stimulating its adoption worldwide for decades. Community policing can be elastic, vague, locally adaptable, and operationalized politically. In this paper, we are not addressing community policing's results or effectiveness but rather how its very idea is still a rubric under which policing reforms are globally diffused and locally implemented as a successful premise.

Phase 3 is called *institutional adherence* since it describes the process of transposing an experimental model focused on a specific region and dependent on the will of a particular commander to incorporate the NSP model by the PMSP. The process does not occur at once and involves expanding the neighborhoods served by the program based on the demand of residents and other users and training new NSP commands to implement community networks.

According to the sources, the approval of state Law 16,771/2018, which finally regulates the functioning of the NSP, is the apex of this process. The long time between the program's beginnings in 2010 and its consolidation into law in a 2017 bill is noticeable. Colonel Camilo, then-State Representative from the Social Democratic Party (PSD), proposed the bill. Colonel Camilo had previously been General Commander of the PMSP, appointed by Governor José Serra in 2009, serving until 2012, when he ran for Councilman of the City of São Paulo. His transition to politics coincides with the dissemination of the project on an urban and later state scale.<sup>8</sup>

Currently, the program consists of various manifestations in cities throughout the state's countryside and in the capital's metropolitan region, divided into 22 regional military police commands covering 284 of the 645 municipalities in the state (Telmo 2022). According to police estimates, the program has reduced crime in the cities where it has been implemented from 60% to 90% (Estadão 2020). Although the numbers are uncertain, and there is no determination of the real impact of the project on these indices, they are crucial to the police's discourse of success. The interviewed police officers repeatedly stressed the initiative's importance in reducing crime. Adherence to the program is voluntary and relies

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<sup>8</sup> As of this paper's latest revision (2025), a change in the governing party at São Paulo state shows that political disputes are a central part of the disputes between different policing paradigms. Further research could clarify this aspect as we witness the rise of a new police group in power.





on requests from organized neighborhood groups or resident associations. The most common way of approaching the police is through the local CONSEG or police force. Therefore, campaigns to mobilize the public have also been part of the model's dissemination strategy within the state.

Institutional adherence is a critical inflection point for the diffusion process, as it is related to three key points for transforming the experimental model into a policing best practice. The first point is the institution's recognition of the program's success, which is related to an impulse of political will since it depends on decisions made by those in charge of security governance, including the Secretary of Security and the governor. Secondly, it releases public and private funds as the project ceases to be an experiment to perform as a political platform for the various bureaucratic and political actors involved. Finally, adherence produces international visibility when recognized by civil society, including universities, as a best practice successfully incorporated by local police forces.

Finally, we call Phase 4 *international diffusion*. This phase describes when the NSP experience, created in the State of São Paulo, became a good community policing practice and an element of international diffusion. Chronologically, this phase does not occur after Phase 3 but rather simultaneously. That is, it did not depend on passing the NSP law, although it has benefitted from the institutional consolidation of the program. The national and international circulation of NSP police officers benefits from the program's alleged success. Paradoxically, its international visibility was stated as one of the symptoms of this success by our sources.

Although there is no detailed public record of the complete counseling programs, the police officers interviewed during this study indicated that there were trips to the Brazilian states of Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Rio Grande do Sul, and Bahia to promote the program nationally. They also mentioned trips abroad, particularly to Central American countries such as Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. The police captain also mentioned participating in a training program in Paraguay. Our sources did not specify how they incorporated these workshops into the foreign local police forces. Their participation is short-lived, with no control over the results. However, according to what we observed from the Brazilian experience in training programs that received representatives of foreign institutions, the influence occurs by informing new practices for extended periods, and in the case of Brazil, for decades.





These are usually short trips since the officers involved in the international exchanges are not entirely dedicated to training programs. So, most exchanges occur through lectures and short-term training programs that are not profoundly institutionalized, which makes tracing the model's exact path challenging. This type of exchange does not look much like international cooperation projects involving funding and professionals dedicated full-time to mentoring.

São Paulo has also exported other community policing experiences. The Japanese Koban assistance programs signed with São Paulo in 2008 required São Paulo to become a “disseminating hub” of the model to other states in Brazil and other Latin American countries. Eleven Brazilian states have incorporated the Koban model (PMSP, 2023). All the officers interviewed in this study stressed that there is a link between the Koban program and the NSP. This illustrates the adaptable framework of community policing methods since a *neighborhood watch* is not a central piece of Koban. On the international level, the Brazilian government created the National Secretariat for Public Safety (SENASP) within the Ministry of Justice and the Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC) within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to work with partnerships to diffuse the Koban model internationally. As a result, the São Paulo police have trained at least 128 officers from Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala (PMSP 2016).

The current moment highlights that São Paulo, mainly through its military police, functions as an intermediary within a complex network of security policies. The NSP program has emerged from various international influences and experimentation on a local level. These experiences primarily originated from knowledge generated by the Global North. However, this study's map also reveals a nuanced exchange of knowledge on the South-South level. Once established, the program has become an additional component in the diverse repertoire of security policies acknowledged as global best practices. Contrary to the intuitive perception of being a mere landing point for policies from more developed countries and international power centers, translated policy experiences in São Paulo have taken flight toward new destinations.

## Conclusion

We have sought to analyze the NSP as a product of a community policing paradigm that has circulated transnationally thanks to the stimuli and efforts





of diffusing agents. While the NSP draws from international experiences, the specific pathways of knowledge diffusion to Brazil remain unclear. Our aim is to identify these agents and pathways, recognizing the global circulation of community policing over the past few decades, which has influenced policing policies in São Paulo, even if not as a product of direct transfer. Our study has been dedicated to understanding how the knowledge about community policing has evolved and shaped the context that has informed the implementation of this policy in São Paulo.

Inspired by international precedents, its formulation has been considered successful by some key stakeholders and has led to its adoption in other cities in the Global South. São Paulo has assumed a pivotal role as an intermediary hub for disseminating and implementing community policing models, especially from a South-South perspective. The state's active engagement in networking and sharing experiences with international counterparts has promoted the diffusion of its community policing model. Through workshops, seminars, and partnerships with other cities and countries, São Paulo has played a key role in promoting the adoption of community-oriented security strategies.

Building an international genealogy of locally implemented policing programs like the NSP is not an obvious or straightforward process. The transnational circulation of policing models often occurs through poorly institutionalized channels. Even when diffusion programs are formalized by signed agreements that involve resources, local adaptation also brings innovations that do not make them simple replicas. In addition, we have noticed that local police usually claim authorship of successful programs, so local actors often skip any reference to international learning. This tends to hide the traditionally more evident power relations, which run in a north-south direction.

The malleability required for community policing to adapt to local contexts becomes evident when comparing transnational best practice models with locally implemented final products. This underscores the challenging nature of the translation process as these models navigate local social and institutional structures, which sometimes are incompatible. In Brazil's case, community policing has grappled with a tradition of police brutality and institutions perceived as being rigid, hierarchical, and resistant to the paradigm's established criteria. Despite these challenges, Brazilian experiences have been identified as internationally recognized models. The NSP, shaped by international influences, has generated innovations now being exported to other countries in the Global South, particularly





Latin America. In this regard, this São Paulo program has functioned as an intermediate nodal point in global policy circulation and has helped spread western oriented policy.

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