Police corruption in Mexico

Police corruption in Mexico is currently one of the greatest challenges facing Mexican law enforcement agencies and politics. Corruption within Mexico is spurred on by high unemployment rates, low wages, and the widespread prevalence of drug trafficking.

Contents

History of corruption

Corruption in Mexico has its roots in colonial times. With the arrival of conquistadors, the Spanish crown began assigning offices of power to certain wealthy and influential people. These offices were often short-lived because officials were charged with collecting revenue, maintaining order, and sustaining their regions while relying on only local sources of wealth and sustenance. People began to learn how to manipulate their local political leaders and would hold fiestas to gain favor with political leaders. This system of bribery and purchasing one's way into power and influence continued into post-colonial times, where the Mexican society organized itself into a pyramid-like hierarchy with the rich and powerful at the top. After independence, corruption was used not only as a means of advancement but also as a means to provide goods and services. In this way, corruption became a method for lowly-paid bureaucrats to raise revenue in order to boost infrastructural and social projects as well as supplement incomes.

Causes of corruption in Mexico

Social advancement and economic survival

Some corruption exists as a means to either boost ones standing in the local community or to supplement the extremely low incomes that most of the Mexican population receive. Many Mexican officials use corruption to either boost their social influence or to boost their income. Corruption can also be caused by a desire to manipulate and influence other people.

Corruption in the police

Corruption in the Mexican police can take many forms; it ranges from taking bribes to ignore crimes to active participation in criminal activity such as extortion, drug-trafficking, and assassination. The Mexican police are notorious for their corruption that is evident on all levels of law-enforcement, local and federal. Some Mexican police officers enter law-enforcement not because of a genuine interest in policing but because of ulterior motives. Some join to escape criminal pasts in other states, others join to earn some money before moving onto other business ventures, while others join to increase their criminal networks, allowing them to boost drug and crime spread, connections, and distribution.

Effects of police corruption

There are several resulting effects of widespread police corruption. Over 92% of crimes go unreported or are not investigated according to Mexico's 2012 National Survey on Victimization and Perception of Public Security. More than two thirds of Mexican citizens believe that some or all Mexican Police officers are corrupt. [1] 43% of Mexican citizens believe that corruption is the main obstacle facing successful law-enforcement. Many people have reported bribing the police, even for minor incidents such as illegal parking and other traffic violations. Mexico's business officials have noted that police corruption has had a severely negative influence on business and economic progress. Police corruption is also, in part, to blame for the continued spread of illicit narcotics and the growth of the drug manufacturing and distribution industries.

Efforts to stop corruption

The Mexican government claims to have taken many steps to combat corruption. Despite these efforts, even when individual cases of corruption are reported, the matter is seldom investigated and almost never prosecuted.

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"Everything in This Job Is Money"

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Inside the Mexican Police

For the first time in Mexico, a peaceful transfer of power is about to occur from one political party to another. On July 2, voters ended 71 years of uninterrupted rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Unsurprisingly, confirming the Actonian dictum that power corrupts, Mexico's police forces have become legendary for their corruption. President-elect Vicente Fox Quesada (profiled in "The Next Mexican Revolution," fall 1996) has vowed to tackle the issue head-on, beginning with a reorganization of the federal police, when he takes office December 1.

But as the following study of a typical police force on the outskirts of Mexico City demonstrates, corruption in Mexico is by now thoroughly institutionalized and operates at the local and state as well as federal levels. The authors, sociologist Nelson Arteaga Botello of the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico, and sociology student Adrian Lopez Rivera came up with an ingenious way to document the mechanisms of corruption. Adrian Lopez Rivera enrolled in a police academy and after graduation joined a municipal police force. To his colleagues, he seemed to be just another recruit. But behind the disguise he was carrying out his vocation as a social scientist, documenting every interaction and conversation in copious notes.

In collaboration with his professor, he wrote up his experiences for the Mexico City monthly magazine Nexos, which published them in two installments in April and August 1998. The following translation, excerpted to unify the installments, offers a graphic portrait of a situation in which corruption is the norm and honest performance of one's nominal duty is treated as deviant behavior. The problem lies not with a few rogue cops but with the entire political culture. This study suggests that despite the best intentions of President-elect Fox reform will not occur overnight.

Andrew Reding

The reasons a person decides to become a police officer, at least in the cases we analyzed, are the following: to accumulate capital to start a business; to recover a loss (home, savings, land); to make easy money; and, in only a very few cases, a genuine interest in law enforcement.

The life of those who aspire to become police officers is unquestionably difficult. Most have had a personal history involving law breaking, violence, bitterness and resentment, and drug consumption, and few have gone beyond a primary or secondary education.

A large number of applicants are immigrants from other Mexican states who are in search of a better life or have legal problems that lead them to leave their place of origin. In the city, they find

work in the informal or semi-informal sectors. A few of them have a skill--carpentry, metalworking, radio and television repair, chauffeuring--which affords them an opportunity to find employment. Others with ties to narcotics or stolen-goods distribution rings see police work as a chance to expand their distribution and sales networks. There are also persons who have been police officers most of their lives, and have gone from one police force to another, after being discharged for violent behavior, corruption, or links to drug trafficking and consumption.

In what follows, we describe a few representative life histories. It should be noted that when these men were asked why they chose to join the police force, the typical response, given in the company of peers and usually under the influence of marijuana, was "for money," to which they would add a brief life history, in which certain facts stood out.

My Own Bus

Alejandro sees police work as a way to build up savings to establish his own business. He's originally from a rural part of the state of Mexico, is 23 years old, has been married three years, and has a child. He graduated from secondary school and worked as a bus driver before applying to become a policeman. He was persuaded to apply by four friends. He wants to be a policeman "for three years, because that way, between pay and bribes, I'll be able to purchase my own bus." Alejandro is among the few applicants whose past is not scarred by violence.

Miguel's case is different. He joined the police to make money and to "recover what destiny and the police" took away from him. His first daughter was born when he was 18. After working in a slaughterhouse, Miguel joined the fire department. But within a year, he was detained for possession of drugs. In the prosecutor's offices, they asked for his voter identification card and other personal information.

The last name and address coincided with the person they were looking for; all that was missing was to find out whether he was "El Mosco." That was his brother's nickname. He did not give his brother up, and instead said he was the person they were looking for. He was incarcerated in the Reclusorio Norte, charged with possession of drugs, robbing residences, and a holdup at a clothing factory. His brother visited him from month to month, for the sole purpose of persuading him that it was best to keep on assuming his false identity.

Miguel comments:

My brother and his gang would come and tell me they were working on getting the money an official requested to obtain my freedom, but the months kept on passing. As an inmate, I had acquired a reputation for being violent. Ten months passed, and I finally got out after my mother sold her house to obtain the money to free me. My job as a fireman awaited me, thanks to the chief, but I didn't return to it because only as a policeman could I recover the lost money and my mother's home. That's what I was told by my cousin Roberto, who is a patrolman.

Rodrigo is originally from Veracruz. He's 22, single, and left school in the first semester of training as an electrical technician. He killed a person in his hometown:

I went to his house and with five machete slashes I killed him, and for no more than fucking around. Because one day, drunk and half-smothered with mezcal [a Mexican alcoholic beverage distilled from agave] in the town bar, my brother came looking for me to help me get home because I was in bad shape. But there was still a lot of mezcal in the bottle, and since we kept on drinking, my brother kept coming back, awaiting the moment I would stop drinking with Carmelo, who now rests

in peace. Carmelo was looking at my brother, when he made the comment that cost him his life: "Hey Rodrigo, your brother seems like a fag, the way he moves, and when I look at him he smiles; they say in town that he likes to go out at night in your sister's clothes in search of a husband."

Rodrigo left his hometown and moved in with his sister. He worked in the Gillette factory for a year, and his wages enabled him to rent a room. Then he was laid off and applied for a position with the Municipal Police, after being encouraged to do so by a neighborhood friend: "As a policeman, no one will come looking for me for killing Carmelo."

There are those who make police work a way of life, passing from one department to another, as in the case of Alberto. He's 29, separated from his wife, with one child. He's been a policeman since he was 18. In 1988, he became a police officer in a municipality of the state of Mexico; a year later he joined the Preventive Police of the Federal District.

Because his beat included part of the capital's central plaza, his relationships with street vendors, prostitutes, and homosexuals were part of his daily routine. On one occasion, while on patrol in the center of Mexico City, he ran into two prostitutes taking drugs. He made them get into the patrol car, and negotiated: he would let them go free if they would have sex with him and his patrol partner. The two couples shared a hotel room. "Moments later, there were knocks on the door, and my commander entered the room with other policemen."

Alberto was arrested, and discharged a few days later. A few months later he was charged with rape, and moved elsewhere, joining a state police force. He remained with the state police for three years until being discharged for alcoholism and drug addiction. He then decided to accompany his brother to the United States, but he didn't make it at first. He stayed in Tijuana for a while, working as a bouncer at a bar. After six months he made it across the U.S. border and worked as a kitchen aide in a restaurant. But alcohol, drugs, and venereal disease interfered with his work record, and two years later he went back to Mexico with the objective of returning to police work.

Javier was a member of the motorcycle transit police of the Federal District. He says the best location for extortion is the intersection of Reforma and Insurgentes Avenues, because many wealthy adolescents pass through there at night, drunk and speeding. But better yet than detaining them for those reasons is to wait until they're involved in an accident or hit someone, and then have to place a telephone call. "In no time their relatives arrive with loads of cash."

According to Javier, his dismissal was provoked by ambition. One day, in the early hours of the morning, he waited for "the juniors" to emerge from the discotheques. He and his partner had already gathered a considerable sum of money, rings, a gold medallion, and a woman's overcoat, "one of those heavy, soft ones." All of a sudden they heard a big noise coming from a neighboring street, which they immediately investigated. A person had run his car into a pole. He was still alive, but that didn't matter. They stole his wallet containing 800 pesos, rings, gold chains, a watch, and a suitcase with clothing. But when they opened the trunk and found a small bag full of dollars, the man began to react:

My partner...began hitting the individual, who was already bleeding to death, with his pistol. My partner, who was going crazy, ended up disfiguring his face. We had thought he was unconscious, or at least unable to recognize us. We left him that way to slowly bleed to death. Then the neighbors reported the accident and they picked up the dead man. All was well until the relatives started asking for the belongings of the deceased, and one of them discovered that the taco vendor two blocks away was wearing the dead man's ring. That's when the investigation began, and it was discovered that those were our favorite tacos.

After Javier was fired, he started looking for work, but as soon as he told anyone he had been a policeman, they turned him away. That's when he decided to join the police of a nearby municipality.

Learning How to Mine Gold

Like any other social organization with a defined structure, the police creates an order, a hierarchy, and above all values that make possible the reproduction of certain attitudes and behaviors. Though the academy trains cadets not only to carry out their job but to extort as well, the street is the true school of police life. It is there that the cadet puts into practice what he has learned and modifies it to suit reality.

In their first days of active duty, new police officers learn behaviors and attitudes that allow them both to extort and survive, because the danger of losing one's life is always a possibility. The novices become integrated into the life of the zone to which they are assigned, where experienced police officers teach them how to go about doing things. In this sense, the process of integration has two distinct phases. First, there is the development of an esprit de corps between the upper ranks and the novices. Once this is accomplished, the rookies are prepared to handle themselves in a manner that makes possible the systematic reproduction of corruption.

In one case, a zone commander welcomed new officers in an office, in a corner of which stood an altar with images of saints and the Virgin of Guadalupe, while a sign on the wall proclaimed, Discretion Is the Virtue of Every Good Police Officer:

We need young people in the zone, enthusiastic folk with a calling for a police career; capable men strong enough to handle long and difficult days. In 1977, when I joined the force, almost all the men were older, but, in spite of that, they had spirit, they knew police tactics, they exercised control over the zone. Nothing and no one escaped from them; they were like hunting dogs, police officers who perished in the line of duty, who could not be surprised or frightened by anything.

The commander spoke to the novices about his own life as a policeman, perhaps to help them identify with him. He said he was 48 years old and married, with six children. He had no more than a fifth-grade education. In 1977, he joined the municipal police, and three years later was named zone commander, thanks to a friend who was a municipal official. But that very year the municipal government changed hands, and the incoming government took note of rumors about protection money the commander was said to be collecting from businesses, stores, and stall-holders in the town marketplace that were within his jurisdiction. He was removed, but after a restructuring of the upper ranks--with the advent of another administration--once again became zone commander.

Once each of the cadets had concluded a brief biography--concealing of course the real reasons for joining the police force, and any dark secrets--the commander used his radio to issue an order to the zone's patrol cars to come to his office, while giving notice:

Today, because it's your first day in the zone, you will make the rounds of the neighborhoods, you will see the boundaries of the zone, together with its most problematic points. It's important that you keep in mind that we are dealing with one of the most troubled zones in the municipio [equivalent to a county in the United States]. The zone has serious problems with alcoholism, drug addiction, homosexuality, and prostitution; with more localized problems of youth gangs, street vendors, and organized crime.

Here, young men, there are no entres [payments up the chain of command, to share the take in

bribes]. You have no obligation whatsoever to your commander, nor to the shift officers. Yours truly does not tolerate extortion, let alone any kind of corruption. However, the zone can be characterized as a gold mine, and all it's missing is some good miners. You will answer to the head of the first shift, who will explain to you his arrangement. Finally, I welcome you and wish you good luck, hoping you will fit in with the rest of the group, a group that functions as a family.

When the patrol cars arrived, the commander directed each novice to pair off with an experienced police officer. Though the commander had made clear that there were no entres, the reference to the zone being a gold mine and that all that was lacking were good miners, combined with the fact that the shift commander was in charge, led the new police officers to understand that it was precisely to him that the entre was to be given. Their suspicions became confirmed during the first tour of the zone. On the street, the novices learn from the veterans, and what they learn depends on the teacher; and in fact a novice can have several guides who show him the peculiar ins and outs of police life. In what follows we present the case of a newly enrolled police officer who had the chance to be a student of three prominent officers with lengthy careers in public service.

The Lessons Begin

Jorge gave Eduardo his first lesson on how to be a good police officer: the orders of superiors must be obeyed without the slightest hesitation or doubt. "Don't question the commanders, shift officers, officials or even senior officers, because authority is always right. If one of them gives you any indication or suggestion, just obey him, even if it seems contrary to what you think or want. Authority is always right."

The second lesson was given out: you must let veteran police officers teach you that extortion is an art that must be learned from them and must be carried out with caution. "Another thing: it's better to work with an experienced fellow from the zone, a senior police officer, who is familiar with the zone and the methods of extortion. A recent graduate often wants to rob or extort without understanding the consequences. Money must come in little by little, without forcing anything, without affording any opportunity to get caught. Do you know that there are cases in which, after just two months of service in the zone, police officers are discharged for trying to become overnight millionaires?"

As Jorge was giving his lessons, Eduardo inspected every inch of the patrol car, inquiring about the purpose of this or that colored button. The automobile stopped in front of a small fruit stand, where the veteran officer asked to be given two of the largest and juiciest apples. As they got underway again, the novice, following Jorge's advice, observed with great care each neighborhood they passed through. Come nightfall, the patrolman explained to the rookie that it wasn't just a matter of working the streets, that there were also ways to have a good time in a zone bathed in prostitution. "Okay now, partner, if you want a woman to quench your fire, what you need to do is get out of the patrol car and pick out the woman you want. And if she doesn't want to, force her into the patrol car and take her to the station. Try it out and you'll see.

The zone was full of prostitutes and homosexuals hurriedly crossing the street on their way to the bars. Mouths with red lipstick and short skirts incited passersby to discover what was hidden behind a curtain of smoke and red lights in each bar and cantina. With dawn, the shift ended, and the patrol car returned to headquarters.

On the next shift, the rookies were introduced to the rest of the zone's police officers. There were shouts: "We welcome you.... Now my boots will take on a new shine.... You're being baptized."

Once the commander had called the roll, the formation dispersed and the "baptism" got under way. The rookies were doused with pails of cold water, then whipped with wet towels, and finally kicked around a bit. Everyone laughed as they watched the travails of the newly baptized rookies. As Gusravo puts it: "The baptism is the way we receive and welcome each of the new companions; you will have the same opportunity with the new arrivals, once they leave the academy."

The First Shift

Following the initiation ritual, the commander returned to make assignments for the first shift, seeking to pair novices with experienced policemen. The parameters for determining who would be a patrolman or an escort (sidekick), or who would be assigned to a watchpost, were related to the ability to drive a patrol car--possession of a driver's license--or in the ability to memorize and interpret radio codes. Thus, for example, Alberto and Heriberto were made escorts because they did not know how to drive. Heriberto teamed up with his brother, who was in charge of a patrol car. Octavio, with his experience as a truck driver, was trusted with the steering wheel of a patrol car; he was accompanied by El Chango, a veteran of the zone. Because of their military experience, Pedro and Raul were assigned to watchposts in the most difficult neighborhoods.

The shift began at nine in the morning. The police were assigned their destinations, the patrolmen checked their vehicles, turned on their radios, and gave the signal that informed the commander that they had begun their patrols. The patrol cars pulled out into the street. Last to leave were Jose and Eduardo, who walked to the market nearby.

Jose: "Have you had breakfast, partner?"

Eduardo: "No."

Jose: "Well go for it, because otherwise the donkey doesn't walk."

Breakfast at a taco stand lasted more than an hour, after which the patrol got under way. Jose began giving the rookie his first tips on what a police officer does, which would become the third lesson--the importance of money to survival in the police force:

Look, partner, we are here to get all the money we can, and if you come at this with other ideas you won't fit into the group, and will therefore be of no use as a police officer. You're here because you want to get rich overnight. Don't trust anyone here, neither your companions or citizens; don't bend to anyone.

Here in the zone, as in all of the police force, don't inform about what is done and what is heard. There are no names, nor attributes of companions and commanders. Never doubt anything that seems suspicious to you, because it is doubtless suspicious--go check it out, because it's money.

You should always be alert to what is happening around you, don't let anything or anyone surprise you. Search, sniff, observe, and discover. Everything in this job is money. After you get experience as a sidekick and then as a patrolman, you'll realize that what I'm telling you is true. Everything inside the police force is handled with money. No favor from companions, commanders, or the upper ranks is by good will. Everything must be paid for.

The two policemen continued their rounds. Turning a corner, they surprised two people drinking beer on a bench. That's when Eduardo got his fourth lesson--and his first practical one: a police officer's proper form of extortion. They detained the youths and took them to the patrol car. After a long drive, they pulled over on a quiet street.

Jose: "All right now, boys, would you like me to alleviate your problem of drinking in the public right of way, or would you like to spend 36 hours locked up?"

Detainee #1: "No, officer."

Jose: "Well, what are you going to do?"

Detainee #2: "All we've got on us is ten pesos."

Jose: "No way, what do you mean only ten pesos? What I want is money, but not ten pesos. I suggest you guide me to your home.... In all likelihood your relatives have a little more money.

The two individuals accepted the proposal. Before arriving, the patrolman told Eduardo to cover up the patrol car number with his body, by leaning against the car door. Just as soon as the family members were informed of the problem, the father shouted to the mother to give the policeman 50 pesos. When the latter received the money, he bid the family a friendly goodbye, reminding them of the importance of keeping an eye on the children to keep them from breaking the law, above all when there are police officers who are doing everything possible to enforce it.

The policemen continued on their rounds, as the patrolman explained--in a fifth lesson--the importance of covering oneself as best as possible while engaging in extortion: "Be careful to hide the patrol car number. One must create as much confusion as possible in case people decide to complain. You can use your cap to cover your face. When the accuser is unsure of the patrol car number and of the police officer who engaged in extortion, then everything favors the police officer, and that's when you screw 'em."

With nightfall, the two policemen hung around a bit, awaiting the beginning of the rounds by convoy, that is, in the company of other patrol cars that, in single file, make the rounds of a section of the zone. The objective is to put on a show of force in the streets, to show people the police are watching over their neighborhood. Nevertheless--and here's where the sixth lesson began--the convoys also serve to extort from groups of youths who drink alcoholic beverages in the streets and in front of their homes. Jose says:

On weekends, and even more so on warm nights, many people, especially young people, hang out with friends in front of their homes. They talk while drinking beer and listening to music. So there is much to do. First one detains one or two of these persons who are having a good time outside the door to their home. The others come to their friends' aid by collecting money to release them. Second, as all of them run off, they forget the tape deck and everything else they were entertaining themselves with. That's where the sidekick comes in. You must take all you can. Things that have value, obviously--don't pick up pieces of shit. And immediately cover the patrol number to avoid any complaint.

This type of operation yields a lot. If you afterward add up the monetary value of the things you've picked up, you'll see that in very little time you can acquire your own business. But that is something you need more than two police officers for. We must await the arrival of additional patrol cars, because this business occurs in low-income neighborhoods where they are real sons of bitches.

With about half a dozen of the zone's patrol cars gathered together, the convoy got under way, consisting of some 16 police officers. Heavily armed, they entered the lowest-income areas. The caravan was organized by a leader, with the following characteristics: 1) seniority; 2) knowledge of the territory and persons in each neighborhood; 3) precise knowledge of the organized social

groups in the zone; 4) experience in dealing with the municipal administration.

The leader organized the work in the following manner: first, he decided how the patrol cars would station themselves; second, he decided who would use shotguns and who would use handguns; third, he indicated who would search those who were detained; fourth, who would bring them to the station for booking, and in case that should happen, who would accompany them; fifth, advised on what to steal, and what not to steal; sixth, indicated who to detain, how to detain them, and how to extort from them; seventh, collected and divided up the money and other articles obtained in the process.

The Most Eloquent Lesson

But without a doubt the seventh lesson Jorge gave him was the most eloquent for a novice. One day, Jorge accidentally fired his weapon while involved in a dispute between neighbors. The bullets struck a 19-year-old student and a 46-year-old worker. Jorge and his partner were arrested and turned over to a judge from the public ministry for investigation. Thanks to a bribe, the investigation was inconclusive. Nevertheless, from that point on they could not return to that zone and police force.

For 300 pesos, Jose's patrol car was transferred to another patrolman. Eduardo was assigned to a police post in the zone, where he had to patrol three neighborhoods by foot. With his new assignment, Eduardo had to do the rounds of marketplaces and small shops, collecting along the way the offerings of the shopkeepers. He returned to his post at noon. But the nights were terrible.

Beggars, prostitutes, and street children wandered about and made love under cardboard boxes in out-of-the-way spots. The nights became unbearable. Being relieved from the police post became his priority. Fortunately, another patrolman doing his rounds in a police car visited Eduardo and told him how he could get out of that post. In so doing, he reminded him of the lesson about the policeman's purpose, which he had apparently forgotten: "You're here for one simple reason, which is because you have not paid off the commander. Jose must have told you that, shift after shift, you must pay off the commander. If you don't do that, you'r e not a good policeman. Whether a policeman gets assigned to a post depends on the zone's shift supervisor, and the posts get occupied by those who do not turn in the daily entre."

A New Teacher

Eduardo offered 100 pesos to the shift supervisor, and was reassigned to a patrol car as an escort. Eduardo's new teacher, Mario, a four-year veteran of the zone, explained his work style: "I like money but don't like to fuck people over.... I don't like to spend a lot of time talking to people.... I don't like to have to deal with soldiers.... I don't like dealing with prostitutes and homosexuals.... I believe in the saying that if you want to become an old policeman, make like you're an idiot."

Mario went about gathering rents from stores, home-brew wine shops, and pulque vendors [pulque is a home-brewed alcoholic beverage made from fermented agave juice], concluding around noon. At 1:00 P.M., he went to sleep for his siesta. He woke up four hours later to make the rounds of the zone. They ran into two individuals fighting outside a cantina, but the patrolman paid no attention. On the zone's principal avenue, they came across two soldiers drinking beer and arguing, but passed them by. In the secondary avenue, they got a report of two individuals holding up a beauty shop, but didn't answer the call. At about 8:00 P.M., a woman approached, crying, her clothing soiled, complaining that her husband had beaten her. The police officer didn't pay her any attention either. About 9:00 P.M., a taxi driver reported that he had been assaulted. The officer responded: "If

they assaulted you, it was for being an idiot!" At 11:00 P.M., the patrolman went to sleep. At about 7:00 A.M., he got up to watch over the Li consa dairy products stores; five minutes in each of them were enough to gather several bags of milk. At 9:00 A.M., he turned in the patrol car...and the entre to the commander. Then he left with his bags of milk in hand.

On the following shift, Mario again explained to Eduardo the first, and apparently basic, lesson for every policeman--collecting rents [protection money]:

You must have a really good idea what the rents are; Jose must have explained it really well to you. Rents are how the policeman collects from persons who sell beer, pulque, and wine without a permit. It's how the policeman gets money for offering security to shops, winestands, cantinas, bars, pulque stands, butcher shops, beauty shops, barber shops, etc. It's an arrangement between the owner and the policeman. One doesn't just work for the sake of working. You will assist those places that pay for service; those who don't cooperate can go to hell.

Patrolmen collect the rents at the very beginning of the shift. The important thing is to earn them. At first, people distrust the police officer they do not know. It's important for you to note carefully the people who cooperate, so that they come to recognize you, and that way you alone collect the rents.

But he gave another lesson--the eighth in less than three weeks--that explained the discretionary power a policeman acquires if the shops in the zone decide not to pay their rents:

Many people know what the rents are, others don't. In that case you must explain that it's the way the commander collects in order to let them sell within the zone. Obviously once store owners become accustomed to paying the rent and then stop offering the customary cooperation, they become liable to being disturbed, and in the case of cantinas that resist cooperating, they render themselves liable to having the police rape the prostitutes. As you will see, everything in this business is reciprocal. People give money so that the honest policeman carries out his duty in the best way possible. You'll see that now.

The patrolman continued his rounds, stopping in every store and bar. As he did so, he again told the rookie to be careful not to ask too much in the way of rents, because otherwise it could set off a spiral of confrontation between policemen and the owners of certain businesses, especially those dedicated to prostitution. Just before 1:00 P.M., Mario took a break, taking a nap in the patrol car, while Eduardo monitored radio communications.

That's how Mario works every day. He's not interested in extortion, or anything that involves direct contact with people, and that complicates his life. But Mario does understand that one has to provide the entre, and that it is obtained by collecting payoffs from each business in the zone. For that reason Eduardo decided to change partners, to be with a more experienced patrolman, with greater expectations, who would work with the intention of being a good miner.

The Final Lesson

Eduardo then gave his shift officer a 100 peso entre to be reassigned to a different patrol with a different kind of partner. The transfer occurred without any problem. The next teacher gave him more lessons. His reputation transcended the boundaries of the zone and even the police force. His alias was "El Simpson."

El Simpson--Ricardo, to anyone who wasn't a friend of his--is without a doubt an extreme case. For him, collecting rents is more than a competition with his fellow officers. It's a struggle against time.

He's always impatient, especially when entering or leaving each store, cantina, or moonshine joint. Spending the least possible time is his objective.

It is from Ricardo that Eduardo learned the ninth and final lesson about being a police officer: by wearing a uniform, anyone can enjoy as much impunity as his imagination and avarice will allow.

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Note

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The Worst Job In the World

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Full Text:

At Mexico City's police academy--training ground for one of the world's most dishonorable police forces--an instructor launches into his ethics class. With 32 young cadets wearing crew-cuts and spit-shined shoes sitting at metal desks before him, he solicits reasons Mexicans give their police no respect. Hands fly up and each respondent jumps to his feet as the teacher lists the answers on the chalkboard. "Corruption." "Bad behavior." "Use of foul language." "The media." "Poor physical presentation." But it is not clear that the lessons of the ethics class have sunk in. The group recently decided to choose a nickname that could be printed on T shirts worn during training exercises. "We wanted a strong name," explains one of the cadets. The shirts are black, and the back features a muscular cartoon mascot with spiked hair smoking a cigarette. Emblazoned in fat letters across the front, in English, is the word KILLERS.

The irony seems lost on the cadets: Mexicans often struggle to distinguish cops from criminals. During his campaign to dethrone the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which has ruled Mexico for the past seven decades, Vicente Fox pledged to restore the rule of law and weed out dishonest police and other public officials. Five months after his July victory, he finally takes office this week, and the race begins to fulfill his promises. Good luck. At the national level, he has proposed the creation of a "transparency commission," which would investigate major corruption cases of the past, and a department of security and justice, which would consolidate various national police forces in an effort to separate law enforcement from politics. Even though Fox has limited direct influence in local jurisdictions like Mexico City, he will be judged by how beat cops there and around the country behave.

While police involvement in kidnappings and drug dealing captures headlines, the most endemic forms of corruption--and perhaps the most difficult to stop--are the generic bribery and extortion that have become a way of life throughout Mexico. Public-opinion polls show that Mexicans trust police even less than they trust politicians. Interviews with cadets, police officers and investigators trying to crack down on crime inside Mexico City's 80,000-officer force revealed that even the most earnest cops often succumb to the temptations that are both plentiful and low risk. In a month, the cadets will be mere cogs in a system that pays too little, sometimes requires them to make payments to higher-ups and makes a mockery of their ethics class.

It is difficult to know how many crimes police commit since relatively few are caught. But some recent convictions in Mexico City show the crimes can be classified many ways. The creative: a motorcycle cop pretended to have been clipped by a car in order to extort several thousand dollars from the driver--while two other policemen played the part of civilians who witnessed it all. The comic: five officers smuggled hams in a car trunk out of the warehouse where hot to-go lunches are prepared for policemen. The passive: three police ensured the coast was clear for bank robbers to

make a hit. And the tragic: an American expatriate died of asphyxiation after at least seven officers and an ex-policeman force-fed him alcohol to cloud his memory while they went on a tour of automatic-teller machines with his bank card.

For many cadets, the initiation into crime and corruption begins as soon as the six-month basic-training course ends. Or sooner. Last year an instructor was caught demanding $40 bribes to pass his students. "We have one of the most antiquated police forces in the Americas," says the school's director, Juan Torres Escamilla. His office has a rotary- dial phone on the desk and a set of out-of-date encyclopedias in a bookcase. For a visitor, he plays a promotional video entitled "The New Police," which shows cadets, "Starsky and Hutch" style, rolling out of a skidding car. The school also has an Olympic-size swimming pool filled with greenish water as well as a make-believe neighborhood, complete with health clinic and post office, used in training. The roof of the shooting range leaks when it rains.

The 700 or so students are the survivors of a rigorous admissions process. It includes a criminal-background check, a medical exam, a physical-fitness test and a general-knowledge exam (sample question: "The disease known as athlete's foot is produced by a. a fungus, b. a virus, c. bacteria, or d. worms). Finally, recruits must prove themselves emotionally stable by answering the 566 true-or-false questions that make up a personality test. Most cadets come from poor families and see a patrol car as a step up from a job as a construction worker or a clerk at Wal-Mart. The average age is 21. All have completed at least the equivalent of the ninth grade, but only 5 percent have finished high school. Almost half are married, usually with children. About 13 percent are women, and roughly a quarter have relatives in the force. In interviews, nearly everyone seems to have a tale of having been robbed on a bus or assaulted on the street.

"Open the door! Slowly. Get out of the car. Slowly. On your knees!" Wearing his KILLERS T shirt and aiming his baton as if it were a rifle, Mauricio Gonzalez barks the commands at two other cadets playing the bad guys in a training exercise. Gonzalez, a lanky 21-year-old, grew up surrounded by police, including his father and several uncles. In three months, he will be assigned to a patrol car and paid about $300 a month. He says that it is enough to live on, maybe even to buy his own set of wheels, but he worries how he would ever support a family. "Here they tell us not to be corrupt," he says. "They pound it into your head. But from what I know, if you have a patrol car, you have to deliver money to your boss. And on what you earn as a policeman, a person with kids can't survive. We don't want to be corrupt. But they make you corrupt."

So why would anybody want a job that pays so little, makes you the scorn of the public and could get you killed? "You can die, but you can also save lives," Gonzalez says. "What if some bastard is raping a girl? This for me is the worst."

The reality of police life is less romantic for his uncle Fernando. With 10 years of experience, Fernando Gonzalez, 31, earns about $400 a month. Like many of his colleagues, he works another job on his rest days, driving a taxi for an extra $200 a month. That often means finishing a 12-hour patrol at 6 a.m., sleeping a few hours, then driving for nine more hours. His wife adds $300 to the monthly income by buying clothes wholesale and selling them to neighbors. The family income affords them cable television, a two-bedroom apartment in a government-subsidized building and a 1989 Dodge with shredded seats. With help from his accountant brother, Gonzalez is able to send the eldest of his three children to private school.

Shop owners often give him a few pesos or some bread out of sympathy, though lately he's been stuck with station duty because his patrol car is being repaired from a fender bender. He has been thinking about bribing a police mechanic in order to get back on the streets sometime before

Christmas. "If you don't want it to sit in the shop forever, you have to pay to have it done faster," Gonzalez says. In his view, much of Mexican society is corrupt, which makes it difficult for police to stay honest. "Why do the restaurants sell adulterated wine? Because it's cheaper and they can sell it at a higher profit. That's how things work."

It is a lesson reinforced again and again. A few years ago he broke up a robbery at a school. One of the suspects offered Gonzalez $4,000 to let him go. He turned it down and the department gave him an award for bravery. But he was soon disheartened to learn that the suspect had bribed a court official and was freed. "Many police set suspects free. They say, 'Better that we get the money than somebody up the line'," says Gonzalez. "We have needs."

Equally frustrating is the refusal of citizens to report crimes. Gonzalez once saw three teenagers carrying garbage bags full of clothes out of a boutique. He jumped out of his patrol car, nabbed the suspects and grabbed a .357 magnum pistol from one of their belts. The owner only wanted the clothes, not the hassle of having to file charges, so Gonzalez had to let the boys go. But he decided to keep the gun, which he sold to a fellow officer--an illegal gun dealer--for about $500. "Many colleagues say I'm a fool because I've returned the booty from robberies," Gonzalez says. "They see it as a just prize for the danger of the job. Many police are dead because of fights with criminals." He once survived a bullet to the gut during a jewelry-store robbery.

Confidence in the police has sunk so low that when the Mexico City prosecutor released statistics this month showing that car theft, burglaries and murders have significantly declined in Mexico City since 1997, politicians quickly suggested that fewer and fewer people are even bothering to report crimes. One citizens group, Mexicans United Against Crime, recently conducted a telephone survey and found that 60 percent of crime victims, mostly of muggings and robberies, never went to the police. Of those who filed reports, a quarter said they were asked to pay a bribe to ease the process along.

The police in Mexico have never enjoyed great respect. The job has long attracted the poor, and there is a tradition of beat cops' augmenting their salaries with tips from merchants. But the reputation of the police did not really start plummeting until the 1960s, as the government began cracking down on students protesting for democracy, cementing the image of the police as little more than an oppressive wing of the PRI, which had ruled Mexico since 1929. The most devastating blow came in 1976, when President Jose Lopez Portillo appointed his friend Arturo Durazo as the Mexico City police chief. The tales of corruption and brutality under his tenure are so legendary that they were made into a best-selling book and a movie, "Lo negro del Negro Durazo" ("The Darkest of the Dark Durazo"). Every week he demanded several hundred dollars from each of his 80 subchiefs, who in turn collected the money by extorting it from their underlings. The result was an institutionalized top-down pyramid of corruption that rested on beat cops, who were forced to rent their guns and pay their bosses for the right to patrol zones with the highest potential for extracting bribes from citizens. Durazo, who died in August, built a mansion modeled after the Greek Pantheon--adding a replica of Manhattan's Studio 54 disco, a casino, a racetrack and a heliport-- which was turned into the Museum of Corruption after he went to prison on racketeering and weapons convictions several years later.

Since the PRI lost Mexico City in 1997, the new government has been trying to clean up the police. The current chief, Alejandro Gertz Manero, fired several old bosses, restructured districts and began more careful monitoring of patrol cars. The efforts at times have bordered on the bizarre. For several months last year, only female police officers were allowed to hand out traffic tickets, on the theory that women are naturally less corrupt than men. The experiment failed. "I think Gertz wants to make changes. But he can't," says Jorge Chabat, a professor who studies crime. "The

brotherhood"--as he calls the mafia- style network--"has been around for too long."

One problem is finding witnesses. As in many cities, few police are willing to testify against their colleagues for fear of retribution. And citizens have come to accept and even appreciate the ease of being able to pay a bribe instead of going to court and paying the full-price fine. Last year an internal anti-corruption unit, known as Grupo Alamo, determined that a half-dozen cops were raking in several hundred dollars a day, extracted in $1.50 bribes from motorists who made a popular--and illegal--U-turn near a highway-exit ramp. A few blocks down the road, the investigators pulled over 63 drivers who had paid the bribe, but not one was willing to testify against the cops.

Despite such absurdities, there have been modest successes. The office of Roberto Perez Martinez, a city prosecutor, looms over a warehouse- size room of half-open file cabinets, desks stacked with bulging binders and dozens of lawyers and investigators hunched over computers. Perez oversees the prosecution of public servants, and in the last three years his office has sent about 900 officers to jail, mostly for extorting bribes. As for institutionalized corruption, Perez says: "We're starting to break it. Were talking about very old structures and many interests. There are still so many gangs inside the police that are not identified." Asked how many traffic police have never accepted a bribe, Perez answers without pausing: "Zero."

When Fox becomes president this Friday, Mexicans will be looking for a quick fix. Fox has promised to filter corrupt police from the ranks but has also admitted that it would be difficult to suddenly fire thousands of them. Most analysts say that the most important change will come not from what Fox does, but from what he represents: a fresh start after 70 years of PRI rule. "Only society can change this. Not Fox," says Ernesto Lopez Portillo, who has written extensively on public security. "I don't believe in messiahs."

Back at the Police Academy, the "Killers" pay close attention to a lecture on how to interact with citizens. "For the image of the institution we represent, we have to be clean-shaven, nails clipped, hair cut," says the instructor. "We have to shine our shoes. We have to shine our badges. The uniform should be clean and ironed." What he doesn't say is that police officers often have to spend two weeks' pay on those shoes, badges and uniforms. Oscar Garcia Ramirez, a 23-year- old traffic cop who drives a tow truck, was luckier than many. He was given the pants of a uniform, but the waist was size 40, eight inches too big. He bought three pairs in his own size.

Like many of his colleagues, Garcia was a crime victim before he was a policeman. Four years ago Garcia and his brother, Rodrigo, were getting a lift from a friend when they tapped another car at an intersection. The friend admitted it was his fault and agreed to pay for the damages. But when the three arrived at the house of the other driver with the cash a few days later, the man opened fire with a pistol. Oscar dove behind a parked car, but one bullet struck Rodrigo in the shoulder and another hit the friend in the ankle. The brothers went to the hospital and two days later to the police to report the shooting. After waiting for several hours, they finally were able to tell their story, but the man was never prosecuted. "They didn't do anything," Oscar says. "They said they were investigating. I don't believe them. I know the system now."

He joined the police to make money. And soon after graduating from the Police Academy in 1997, Oscar quickly learned that most of his colleagues were doubling their salaries with bribes. From his point of view, such transactions work in the interest of both the officer and the driver without tail-lights or a license. "Many times they earn very little, too," he says. "We can't make them pay the fine." Married now with two small children, Oscar makes window frames, which brings in an extra $300 a month. He has also been building a second story onto a crumbling concrete house in a slum on the outskirts of Mexico City. "I sometimes impress myself with how much I have achieved

in three years. Maybe it's not a lot. But we're trying to improve our lives," he says. "Maybe when my kids are 20, this place will be better."

Rodrigo, meanwhile, remained at home with his widowed mother in a two- room shack decorated with her Bible-scene posters and his cut-outs of women in bikinis. For a while, he helped pay the bills by working as a messenger and pulling passengers in a cart attached to a bicycle, all the while dreaming of becoming an electrician. But, he explains, "I didn't have money to continue school. My brother told me the course at the Police Academy isn't difficult." Now one of the "Killers," Rodrigo has already experienced the public's disdain for his new profession. One day a week cadets ride along with full-fledged officers. "When we put our uniforms on, the people honk their horns because they don't like us," he says. Fox can't change that overnight. But if Mexicans don't start feeling safer soon, he could be the next target of their contempt.

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Mexico begins to wade through morass of police corruption

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The final misfortune of Josue Ulises Banda Cruz, a 17-year-old ne'er-do-well, was that he was standing on a corner drinking beer with his buddies when the police came cruising by at 2 a.m last Tuesday.

Officer Jose Luis de la Cruz Gamas's crude crowd-dispersal technique -- firing his service revolver in the general direction of the young men -- proved fatal. One bullet struck Josue in the back of the neck. The officer took the dying boy, threw him in his patrol car, and dumped his body on a deserted street, the police and witnesses said.

The next day, the patrolman was arrested and booked for murder. Then his fellow officers let him flee.

Many of Mexico City's citizens think their biggest law enforcement problem is the police. Thousands of uniformed officers do double duty as criminals: petty thieves, armed robbers, extortionists and, on occasion, killers.

"They were not made to serve society," Alejandro Gertz Manero, the federal public security chief, said in an interview. "The police are a force that the people fear."

The problem is hardly a Mexican phenomenon. The biggest cities in the United States have witnessed police corruption and violence over the decades, suggesting that there is still life in the dictum of Alexander Williams, a 19th-century New York policeman: "There is more law in the end of a policeman's nightstick than in a Supreme Court decision."

But now the fight to weed out bad officers is becoming an epic struggle in Mexico.

President Vicente Fox has declared the fight for public security one of his highest goals. In his year and a half in office, he has made some significant advances by cleaning up his federal counternarcotics forces and making a dent in petty corruption among customs officers.

But the states and the cities have seen little measurable improvement in either police corruption or public confidence.

The new Mexico City police chief, Marcelo Ebrard, who commands 82,000 officers, a department twice the size of New York City's, said in an interview that his forces "need very deep reform."

"There is no code of conduct that says this is what a career in the police means, these are the rules of the game, this is the basis of discipline, rewards and punishment," he said.

Chief Ebrard, in office for four months, has created a new Department of Internal Affairs, modeled on New York City's, to police the police. He says he knows the inherent risks of trying to uproot corruption.

"But the worst risk of all," he said, "is to have criminals dressed up as cops."

The police, he said, "have to build a bridge to the people.

"Can that be done?" he continued. "I think so, but it won't be easy because you are going against all tradition."

For many people in the city, state or federal police, the job became an opportunity to make money by any means necessary. A prior criminal conviction has not been a barrier to holding a badge and a gun.

In the last decade police officers have been arrested in the fields of drug smuggling, kidnapping and extortion. Mexico's drug cartels have been a particularly powerful corrupting force. But the deepest problem may be the perception among citizens that a badge constitutes a license to break the law.

"Corrupt police officers recruit their friends and relatives to join the force, allowing corruption to multiply," said Nelson Arteaga Botello, a political science professor who has studied the state police for years. "Corruption doesn't start when police go out in the street, but from the moment they come into the ranks."

Professor Arteaga sent one of his graduate students, Adrian Lopez Rivera, out on an unusual assignment: to join the police for a year and to listen, watch and learn. Mr. Lopez met one veteran officer who told him, "We are here to get all the money we can."

In the end, Mr. Lopez said he learned that "by wearing a uniform, anyone can enjoy as much impunity as his imagination and avarice will allow."

Greed is one problem in a city where the average police officer makes $200 a week. Official violence is another. Mexico's National Commission for Human Rights reports that it receives, on average, about 400 complaints a month from people who say they have been abused or tortured by the police. That far outstrips the commission's ability to investigate such charges.

But Mr. Gertz Manero, the federal public security chief, says the government has the ability to change the way the police work -- and the perception that officers are public enemies, not public servants.

"The police can be an instrument of society, not of public power," he said "They can connect with the public, serve them -- not simply serve the powers that be, but serve the people.

"But today, nobody in Mexico is satisfied with the police, or with the rule of law, or with the administration of justice. That is a fact. Nobody."

By TIM WEINER

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A town on the wild side awaits Sheriff Giuliani

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Back in 1519, Hernando Cortes, a foreigner with some fairly severe ideas about law enforcement, came to clean up this city, vowing to "chastise evildoers" and to ban "human sacrifice and robbery." He wound up destroying the city to save it.

"The Mexicans would force us to kill them all," he wrote during a particularly bad patch. "I began to wonder how I could terrify them and bring them to a sense of their error."

The experience left Mexico with some mixed emotions about foreign intervention.

Now, no one here is comparing Rudolph W. Giuliani to Cortes the conqueror, or his policing strategies to the Spanish Inquisition. But the news that the city will pay Mr. Giuliani and his new consulting firm $4.3 million to help bring law and order to this decidedly disorderly capital has set off a curious cultural clash across the city and around the country.

"An American transforming Mexico -- what's happening here?" Marcela Yturria of Monterrey wrote in a letter to the editor of El Norte, a regional newspaper. "Giuliani says he can stop crime and corruption. These problems have gone on for centuries. No Mexican leader has stopped them."

Mr. Giuliani feels he can, and the the eye-popping statistics of his eight-year mayoralty -- crimes, including murder, fell by roughly two-thirds -- have duly impressed the city fathers.

So "zero tolerance," the idea that no crime is too small to prosecute, which Mr. Giuliani championed in New York, is coming next month to Mexico City. So is Mr. Giuliani, with his Platonic ideal of the city-state -- in his words, "the ideal republic, the ideal state of honesty, the ideal state of integrity, the ideal state of cleanliness or safety."

Will this work? He says the similarities between Mexico City today and New York a decade ago are striking. "Sure, there are differences," he said. "But I'm not sure those differences are relevant."

Others wonder. "It's a different place," said Manuel Camacho Solis, a former Mexico City mayor. "They are going to have to adapt their ideas to reality."

The reality is that, in some ways, this place makes New York City look like Lake Placid. Zero tolerance may not translate well. Most neighborhoods, save the richest, have their prostitutes, hustlers, unlicensed vendors of innumerable goods and services -- and legions of squeegee guys. All are tolerated in a live-and-let-live manner.

Since half the 20 million people who live in the city and on its fringes are dirt poor, locking up

peddlers, prostitutes, pickpockets and petty thieves may only "fill the jails with poor folks," said Rafael Ruiz Harrell, Mexico's leading criminologist.

Mexico City's new and well-regarded police chief, Marcelo Ebrard, is not thinking of arresting every miscreant. Nor does he regard zero tolerance as a cure-all. But he would like to arrest many minor criminals -- and all the major ones. He said that Mr. Giuliani would help him mount "a new line of attack, different from what we have had in Mexico, where traditionally we have been slow to prosecute and punish many kinds of crimes."

"We're not going to arrest everybody," he said "But we have to change the rules of the game" and "adapt to the real world we live in." The harshest reality of that world is that the police are among the biggest criminals.

"They are badly trained, badly paid, obsolete," said Mr. Ruiz Harrell. "We have 90,000 cops with no skills."

The average officer makes about $200 a week. Many supplement that salary by preying on people -- committing robberies and conspiring with kidnappers, for example.

"The police," said Alejandro Gertz Manero, the federal public security chief, "are a force that the people fear," and for all the wrong reasons.

In this city, "criminal justice system" is an oxymoron. No more than 7 percent of reported crimes lead to convictions.

"They could bring Rambo in here, but with the laws we have in Mexico, nothing doing," said Martin Ortega, a transit patrolman.

Most crimes are never reported, mainly because most people are terrified of calling the cops.

Mr. Giuliani said he would vet the city's crime statistics to "make sure everything is being reported." But most authorities say the statistics are a farce. Perhaps 25 percent of all crime victims report their misfortune, polls suggest.

So it seems elements of zero tolerance "are either not applicable here or would have to be adapted to reality," said Jon M. French, a security consultant and former State Department official here. "One idea that won't work is zero tolerance of corrupt police. They've tried that. It only put corrupt cops out on the street to engage in crime full time."

Inevitably, a certain amount of skepticism has crept into the discussion, as when La Jornada, a left-leaning Mexico City daily, announced the news of Mr. Giuliani's appointment. A blistering page-one editorial denounced "atrocities committed by the Big Apple's guardians of law and order against their favorite suspects -- blacks, Hispanics, poor people of every color." Alongside ran a file photo of Mr. Giuliani dancing in drag with the Rockettes.

Nevertheless, many in Mexico City are applauding Mr. Giuliani's arrival.

The corporate executives paying his fee out of pocket -- chief among them Carlos Slim, the richest man in town -- want to make the city a place to do business without having one's pocket picked. And Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador -- a leftist moving toward the center and, he hopes, the presidency -- is breaking hidebound tradition by hiring a famous American conservative to fight crime.

The editorial writers of Reforma, a centrist Mexico City daily, predict that even if Chief Ebrard adopts every aspect of "Giuliani's famous zero tolerance," it will be foiled by bad laws, corrupt police officers and crooked judges.

"Either way," they wrote, "we applaud Mr. Ebrard's fine efforts and splendid intentions and, hoping for a miracle in this beat-up city, we wish him all the luck in the world."

By TIM WEINER