

Community policing through police *panchayats* in Mumbai

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In Mumbai and other Indian cities, inadequate and corrupt police forces and inequitable access to policing services for the poor — and particularly for poor women — has led authorities to re-examine the way in which policing services are being delivered. To address problems in providing public security, an alliance of neighbourhood organizations has become involved in neighbourhood policing through a system of police *panchayats* — neighbourhood organizations that serve to mitigate local disputes and act as a liaison between slum residents and police. Today, about 200 police panchayat centres dot Mumbai's informal slum neighbourhoods, which are home to about half of the city's population.

Prior to the development of the panchayat system, interactions between the police and inhabitants of these informal settlements were overwhelmingly negative. Frequently, there was no regular police presence in the slums, as police entered them only when they had to arrest suspects or deal with a crime.

The panchayat system has addressed communications problems

by harnessing existing community organizations, such as micro-finance groups, to channel slum dwellers' concerns. Typically, about seven women and three men are nominated to liaise with an official from the local police detachment. Each representative covers a designated area, meeting regularly with constituents to hear complaints and arbitrate disputes. This arrangement has allowed panchayat representatives to mitigate and resolve disputes without resorting to the formal legal system, thereby reducing police caseloads.

The panchayat system has sought to resolve problems at the neighbourhood level, and to address them in an environment that focuses on dispute resolution rather than imposing sentences. The system has also improved police transparency and accountability, since police procedures are now under more scrutiny from the public. It has also helped to empower women, both because of the important roles they play in the system, and because they often feel more comfortable reporting crimes such as sexual harassment and violence to a female panchayat representative than to a male officer.

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As more and more of India's elites employ privatized security services, and the state reduces financial support for public police forces, the negative impact of the dwindling quality of policing is felt overwhelmingly by the poor. Familiarizing the poor with policing institutions and making police accountable for their actions is vital for both the poor and the police. ●