What Does the World Spend on Policing?*

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ABSTRACT

Social indicators vary in their breadth and coverage. One popular indicator of the priority that society gives to specific areas of life is a measure of monetary expenditure. Do we spend more or less on X or on Y? Is the balance correct? A necessary precursor to such comparisons is measurement. This paper presents a method for estimating annual global expenditure on policing. Data from the fifth sweep of the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Criminal Justice Systems are supplemented with information from other sources. The relationship between gross domestic product and policing expenditure is examined via regression methods. The coefficients are used to extrapolate across space to produce national policing estimates from which a global estimate is derived. It is estimated that the world spent U.S. $194 billion on public policing in the year 2000. The method utilized to produce this estimate is described, and the implications and possibilities for future research are discussed.

Introduction

PUBLIC EXPENDITURE is always a concern for taxpayers and policy makers alike. Everyone wants value for money, effective and efficient resource allocation, and to spend public monies most appropriately. Yet knowing how much is spent is a prerequisite for making such judgments. This is no less true for policing than for other areas of public policy. At the local level, police chiefs examine expenditures on the various units and sections operating within their jurisdiction. At regional levels, such as provinces in Canada, counties in the U.K., and states in Australia, India, and the United States (Bayley 1992 compares police organizations in these countries), police managers look at overall expenditures and try to determine whether the monetary grease is getting to the crime squeak.

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At the national level, policy makers may look at policing expenditures between regions or states and try to match them according to some sort of criteria such as expenditure per capita or per crime. This is all part of the public policy process of determining the balance between equity and efficiency in resource allocation. At the international and global level, statistics are now frequently used to compare countries and to develop global figures from which we can judge how well individual countries are doing, as well as how we are doing as a planet.

While national estimates allow cross-country comparisons, global estimates allow across-issue comparisons. As a planet, do we spend more on policing or on health? Do we spend more on policing or education? What is the disparity between them? If such disparity exists, is it appropriate in terms of addressing global priorities? Comparisons outside the realm of public expenditure also serve as social indicators of a different sort: Do we spend more on policing than on burgers and fries? (see Figure 1); fish and chips?; wine and beer?; oil and petroleum? Comparisons of such seemingly disparate commodities are of sociological interest, since they give some indication of society’s priorities and preferences. As such, changes in those priorities over time can also be monitored. If, for example, more or less is spent on policing over time — in relative as well as absolute terms when compared to other indicators — then this might arguably be said to reflect changes in society’s priorities.

It is in this context that the present paper reports what the authors’ believe to be the first estimate of global expenditure upon policing. The primary data source is the fifth sweep of the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Criminal Justice Systems (UNCJS), the most recent version of the survey in the public domain at the time of writing. Based on national-level estimates of policing expenditure for all countries reporting that data item, an estimate is made of how much is spent globally on policing in the year 2000. It is presented as a first effort with acknowledged limitations. As such, if it serves to provoke the production of a more

Figure 1. Global Social Indicators, 1999-2000. Sources: Fifth UNCJS and McDonalds (2000).