**Executive Summary**

* According to the Transparency International Global Corruption Barometer (GCB), over a quarter of all South Africans paid a bribe to the police in 2013, but by 2015 the police bribery rate was less than 2%.
* Statistical analysis of Afrobarometer data showed the national effect was skewed by a dramatic reduction in Limpopo province, the poorest province in South Africa.
* Research highlights the role of a seemingly unrelated national government anticorruption intervention into the province.
* While several departments in Limpopo were under investigation for corruption, the police was not one of these. Confusion regarding the scope of the intervention, however, led to the perception among the police that they were under investigation.
* Police behavior regarding bribery changed because they believed they were under investigation and that they could no longer behave with impunity. The threat of loss of impunity was sufficient to significantly change behavior. Whether the impacts on corruption caused by such an unusual disruption are sustained over a longer period of time, however, is questionable.

**Why did police bribery reduce in Limpopo’s police sector ‘against the odds’?**

Our research started with a novel methodology that uses simple regression analyses of sector-specific bribery rates, using the GCB, to identify potential ‘hidden’ positive outliers on bribery – sectors that outperform all other sectors in a country, including those that do so ‘against the odds’ in poor governance environments. The case was vetted by using a range of sources and included qualitative in-country fieldwork.

From 2011-2015, the national government invoked Section 100 (1) (b) of the Constitution, allowing the national government to intervene in five provincial departments in Limpopo that were almost bankrupt —Treasury, Education, Transport and Roads, Health and Public Works. Interestingly, the intervention did *not* include the police. The intervention received a high level of national and local media coverage. By the end of the intervention, the Anti-Corruption Task Team (ACTT) alone had filed 43 corruption cases that were directly related to the intervention along with nearly 300 people either charged with or facing corruption-related charges as a result of the intervention.

The intervention also involved South Africa’s Directorate of Priority Crime Investigation (DPCI, also known as the ‘Hawks’) — South Africa’s elite police force whose mandate it is to target organised crime, economic crime, corruption and other serious crimes. Our research shows how even though the intervention and its associated anticorruption push did not target the police directly, it significantly reduced the willingness of the police to engage in bribery. This is because anticorruption investigations and arrests were highly visible, especially so for the police in Polokwane, the capital of the province, where all corruption cases were registered in Polokwane’s only police station. The mandate and scope of the intervention—which was limited to the provincial departments targeted—was likely not widely understood by local police.

Taken together, our research suggests that the intervention indirectly caused many police officers to act with caution during the intervention. The intervention introduced a perception among the local police that national level actors were making visible steps to effectively control corruption in Limpopo province, establishing what appeared to be an effective ‘command and control’ structure. The solidarity that characterises the police sector meant that officers were restrained in their own behaviour so as not to negatively impact upon their fellow officers. In such a fearful environment, which officer would want to endanger the others in their team by getting caught asking for a bribe?

Data showed that perceptions of police corruption also fell in Limpopo – from more than half saying ‘most or all police are corrupt’ in 2011 to just over a quarter saying it in 2015. In neighbouring Gauteng province, for example, the rate in 2015 was nearly 70%, while in the country as a whole (excluding Limpopo) the rate was 48%. Something remarkable happened in Limpopo, and the public clearly noticed. Presumably, if the situation reverses, the public will notice this too.

**Policy implications**

* Disruptive strategies to fight corruption can work, especially in changing police perceptions of impunity. The visibility of the Hawks and other anticorruption actors, as well as the uncertainty among the police about the intervention’s mandate, all worked to produce this perception of effective ‘command and control’.
* If perceptions regarding improved ‘command and control’ and loss of impunity change, though, the situation is likely to reverse without the structural changes needed to prevent bribery occurring in the first place.
* Changes in public perceptions of corruption can change quickly if the change in corrupt behavior is visible enough. The reverse is likely to be true if corrupt behavior becomes visible again, however.
* The research reminds us that unintended/unanticipated consequences can be welcome as well as unwelcome. However, the anticorruption field gives little—if any—attention to studying these welcome unintended consequences. Without knowing much about when and why such ‘benign side effects’ may have occurred in the past, researchers and practitioner are unable to begin to predict when they may occur again or what factors could be put in place to facilitate them. The method used in this research may help such cases to be identified.

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