

**P**PRIVATE AND PUBLIC IN THE  
SPATIAL ORGANIZATION  
OF EVERYDAY PRACTICES  
OF NEIGHBORHOOD POLICE  
OFFICERS (AN ATTEMPT AT  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY).  
*Summary*

**Ekaterina Khodzhaeva**

Practical and routine aspects of the work of the police (until recently known as *militia* in Russian), if they are not connected to such visible social issues as corruption, abuse of power, or human rights violations, rarely come to sociologists' attention. In my opinion, however, microsociology and ethnography of the everyday practices of law-enforcement agents can provide rich material for understanding the context of professional activities of the Ministry of the Interior's rank and file and for examining precisely how police abuses fit into, or stem from, the officers' routinized work.

The article presents a thick description of the spatial elements of the precinct police officers' routine work. Among all personnel of the Ministry of the Interior (MVD), this occupational group is probably most closely linked to a specific spatial context, because for the people in his designated area of supervision, a neighborhood officer is the primary and often the sole representative of the Ministry. This study is based on data collected by three Kazan' sociologists (Lilia Sagitova, Olga Maksimova, and the present article's author) over a period of six months in 2007 as part of a research project on "Police and ethnic minorities: practices of cooperation in Kazan' and Saint Petersburg," supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

**THE PRECINCT—THE PRIMARY ZONE OF CONTROL**

Formally, the primary objective of the precinct police officers' work is to monitor and oversee the population and the urban space within well-defined borders. Each policeman has an administrative area assigned to him, which, according to regulations, should total no more than 3,500 people (for a senior

officer, whose duties also include supervising the work of two-three junior colleagues, the maximum is even lower—1,500 people). Our study showed that even in best-case scenarios (we were permitted to conduct our research in the city district where law-enforcement work is considered most successful), the real workload for policemen was much higher than the prescribed standard, and one officer may be in charge of an area with five to ten thousand people. Nevertheless, the local policeman is still expected to compile and/or maintain detailed documentation for his entire designated area as well as for individual apartment buildings and houses (the so-called “Precinct Passport” and “Residential Building Passport”). These registers present an area’s sociological (number of inhabitants, share of adults and children) and criminological portraits. They also contain the personal records of individuals residing there (including passport data and contact information) and catalog crimes committed in the precinct (car thefts, homicides, etc.). The police officer must have detailed knowledge of this information. At the same time, the real knowledge and understanding of the neighborhood is acquired, first and foremost, not by studying records, but as a result of practical work. Responding to residents’ calls and complaints, gathering data for other MVD departments or state agencies (military recruitment offices, mental health clinics, etc.), the local police officer forms a spontaneous impression of the area under his control in terms of the frequency of violations as well as of the main “characters” of the criminal or deviant “spots” of the precinct. This knowledge is often latent and functions as “common sense” and not as a professionally acquired organized set of data. Depending on the “criminological” portrait of a neighborhood, policemen differentiate administrative areas and/or their separate loci between “calm,” on the one hand, and “tense” or “difficult,” on the other.

The neighborhood policeman also exhibits knowledge of his precinct’s topography in the ways he moves around his district. Even if he has access to a car, the officer prefers to move through his local area on foot, usually choosing “secret” alleys to keep an eye on “problematic” spots. This way he combines two of his duties: responding to complaints and patrolling the streets (because of the demands on their time, officers rarely get a chance to just make the rounds in the neighborhood).

### **THE PRECINCT STATION—PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACE AT ONCE**

The police station, known in the Russian vernacular as “the base,” is the locus of primary professional solidarity and subordination for several local police officers, as well as an inspector for juvenile offenders, the head of the station, and occasionally part-time police staff and volunteers. Usually, it is a two- or three-room apartment in a residential building, less frequently a separate space in an apartment building’s maintenance office. It is here that the routine tasks of the job are done—filling out paperwork, receiving visitors, interacting with colleagues from other agencies and services. The station is also the place where several local

policemen (usually three-four people, one of whom is a superior officer) work together as a collective. We observed both equal, lateral professional relations among policemen—when a superior officer and his subordinates work only on their respective administrative areas—and various forms of teamwork and collaboration—for example, mentoring and supervision by the senior officer or division of work among officers where each performs the same task for all of the areas, “one’s own” as well as his colleagues’.

The “base” space itself is separated into “public” and “private” zones. The former is open to visitors, but its public character is created in such a way that it structures the visitors’ behavior and prevents “unacceptable” exposure of the officers to the public. The furniture there is placed to emphasize that ordinary citizens are here only as “supplicants” waiting to be received by the official. At the same time, another part of the “base” is demarcated as private (“mine” or “ours”). Ordinarily, visitors are not admitted into this room. This area almost always has a couch and a refrigerator, a space for meals and for recreation in general: it might have an aquarium, a television set, and, less frequently, a stereo or radio. This is where officers sleep if they have to spend the night at the “base.” Sometimes, the kitchen is also used as a place for staff and their circle of friends and colleagues to socialize.

Not only the neighborhood policemen but also some area residents have access to this private space. Typically, it is officers’ “friends and acquaintances” whom each officer accumulates in the course of his work with local residents. Often, the relationships between officers and their “circles” exist on the basis of mutual benefit and even clientelism. It is not difficult to identify each “friend” of each local policeman: it is those who visit the officer “for no reason,” just to socialize with him in their free time.

### **THE DISTRICT—THE ‘BOSSES’ TERRITORY’ AND THE PLACE OF HORIZONTAL COLLEGIAL COOPERATION AND COMPETITION**

The district police office is a space closed to the general public, admission to which one can gain only in a particular role—as a suspect, a victim, a witness, etc.—while neighborhood officers have unobstructed access to it. However, in the latter’s minds, this space is the “bosses’ territory” and, as a consequence, seems alien and even hostile to the “ordinary” policeman. At the same time, their presence in this space is required quite frequently: they are summoned to participate in regular staff meetings, attend lectures, and so on. Besides, every workday of every neighborhood officer starts and ends in the squad room, also seen by the ordinary policemen with hostility because at any moment here they can become targets of the chief’s curses and insults (including profanity) because of, for instance, a perceived failure to solve enough crimes.

However such staff meetings and other encounters establish and develop collegiality and peer connections among all neighborhood officers of the district. Of course, professional solidarity forms not only as a result of daily meetings.

Neighborhood policemen frequently switch districts, move to different police stations, or serve as peer mentors. But everyday interactions strengthen well-established contacts among the staff. Schematically, there are two vectors of horizontal contacts among officers from different "bases." On the one hand, we observed practices of cooperation, such as mutual assistance and consultation in the course of solving of complex crimes and, more importantly, of correctly writing up paperwork for such cases. On the other hand, rivalry and competition are frequently present. They stem not only from personal relationships, but also from the institutional rules. For example, the practice of grading policemen based on the number and type of solved crimes forces officers policing "quiet" neighborhoods to seek out cases "on the side," which clearly leads to competitive relations between neighboring precincts.

### **THE CITY OF KAZAN'—THE OUTSIDE SPACE OF MANDATORY PROFESSIONAL DUTIES**

In some situations, neighborhood officers' professional life takes place on a citywide scale, which leads to their presence in or visits to public and private spaces outside of their local community, elsewhere in the city. First of all, local officers are often employed for policing sporting, cultural, and political events (incidentally, in violation of a statute prohibiting the use of local policemen outside of their administrative districts). In such cases they are enlisted for these jobs after their shifts or on weekends.

Additionally, by the nature of some of their cases, neighborhood officers have to work outside of their designated area's official boundaries. For instance, to collect witness testimony they have to visit hospital doctors who treated victims of assaults or to accompany such victims to the city's only hospital with forensic medicine experts. Working on assignments from offices for military recruitment, local officers have to deliver captured "draft dodgers" to the place of their military registration. Finally, neighborhood policemen have to move around the city to visit people's private residences in order to collect case materials. The difficulty of such cases stems from the fact that if the person sought is not home at the moment of the visit, the officer has no authority to compel him/her to come to the precinct and therefore has to make repeat visits. It is important to note that many visits with officials (like heads of hospitals) are done before lunchtime, i.e. on policemen's free time, since officially their workday does not begin until 2:00 p.m. at which time they have to be within their precinct's territory.

Thus, citywide professional activity, whether it is to participate in policing public events or to do routine work on cases, is perceived negatively and is understood by police as a violation of their labor rights. It is precisely these responsibilities, expected to be carried out outside of one's immediate precinct, that cause the loss of precious weekends and free time.

In general, aspects of everyday life of neighborhood policemen as a professional group that I describe reflect this group's subordinate position within the structure of

the Ministry of Interior. In the eyes of neighborhood officers, much of the work that makes up their daily lives is organized “from above,” without taking into account local peculiarities and sometimes running contrary not only to common sense but also to the Ministry’s own orders and instructions. Excessive burden with “non-major” tasks, effectively unpaid overtime and irregular working hours, and the unbalanced distribution of functions between local police and other agencies of the Ministry of the Interior with a higher share of responsibilities falling on the neighborhood officers lead to latent conflicts with departmental and ministerial management (“paper pushers”) and to ordinary policemen’s feelings of helplessness and inability to change anything. In this situation, an officer’s “roothold” in “his precinct” and “his base” gives him a sense of stability, while the accomplishment of the key mission of winning the confidence of and establishing authority among the residents serves as a resource for raising self-esteem and for creating in his own eyes a positive social status, which can be brought down so much in interactions with superiors. Simultaneously, constant interactions with residents, frequently transformed into friendships, are another “asset.” The range of possibilities that neighborhood officers have—instrumental in fulfilling the work obligations of solving crimes as well as in creating relationships of patronage and “mutually beneficial cooperation”—distinguishes them favorably from other categories of law enforcement officers working with local residents.

*Authorized translation from Russian by Anna Paretskaya*