

August 15, 2006 3:00 am

Academics dish the dirt on UN's worst New York parking violators

By Mark Turner at the United Nations

Diplomats from countries with high levels of corruption, and those from countries that have a poor opinion of the US, are far more likely to commit parking violations in New York, according to a new study from Columbia and Berkeley Universities.

Ray Fisman and Edward Miguel, the study's authors, focused on the United Nations headquarters' host city. The aim was to remove the factor of legal enforcement - which UN diplomats did not face before November 2002 - from would-be parking violators' decision-making, to understand better the cultural aspects of corruption.

What they found was revealing, if not necessarily surprising. Diplomats from low-corruption countries, such as Norway, behaved "remarkably well even in situations where they can get away with violations", the study found.

Those from high-corruption countries, such as Nigeria, committed many violations, "suggesting that they bring the social norms or corruption culture of their home country with them to New York City".

The study also noted that diplomats from countries where popular attitudes towards the US tended to be unfavourable also had significantly more parking violations.

"This setting is one in which diplomats can indulge their personal tastes for rule-breaking without punishment," the report said. "It appears that diplomats from countries where the US is unpopular derive positive utility from breaking US rules or suffer less disutility than other diplomats from doing so."

From November 1997 to October 2002, the study found the 10 worst parking violators were Kuwait, Egypt, Chad, Sudan, Bulgaria, Mozambique, Albania, Angola, Senegal, and Pakistan.

Countries with zero violations included the Scandinavian nations and Canada, but also some

countries with very small missions, such as Burkina Faso, possibly because each mission was given two legal parking spaces at the UN.

A few others had high rates of violations but paid the fines: Bahrain, Malaysia, Oman and Turkey.

The authors claimed that understanding the relative importance of causes of corruption was crucial to public policy. "If corruption is predominantly controlled through anti-corruption social norms, interventions that focus exclusively on boosting legal enforcement will likely fail," they suggested.

They believed that illegal parking in New York, with no fear of punishment, tallied well with standard understandings of corruption, defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain.

They did concede, however, that other social sanctions, such as fear of public embarrassment through the media at home, could also play a role in whether diplomats abused their diplomatic immunity.

The study concluded: "Culture, norms, and emotions - in other words, factors other than legal enforcement - play a key role in government officials' corruption decisions . . . understanding these factors should be taken seriously in debates about the causes of corruption and the policy measures to combat it."

Following a furore over unpaid diplomatic parking tickets,

New York acquired legal powers in late 2002 to tow diplomatic vehicles, revoke their official UN parking permits, and have 110 per cent of the total amount due deducted from US government aid to the offending diplomats' countries of origin.

Parking violations fell substantially afterwards, although cross-country patterns remained similar.

Most Popular on Social Networks

Sitt extends holdings into heart of Paris

Apple's magic act faces falling curtain as sales slow

Britain's systemic sporting revolution

Lawyer optimistic about Edward Snowden's future in Russia

China: Slower but steady

Will the British royal baby buoy the economy?
Probably not

Detroit will start a wave of municipal bankruptcies

Banks battle for share of Singapore's rapid growth