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Police Misconduct and Democracy in Latin America¹

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The police play a fundamental role in any political regime. Whether an authoritarian regime or a liberal democracy, the police are responsible for providing domestic security, ensuring public order, enforcing laws, and channeling claims for justice. Police actions are intertwined with regime performance, as they showcase the state's response to day-to-day issues. The police, not congressmen or even locally elected officials, are typically the first public officials whom people encounter or turn to when safety concerns surface (Marenin 1996). Citizens' perceptions of the police, therefore, are an important component of regime legitimacy, possibly contributing as much or more than trust in other key political institutions, such as Congress, political parties, or the Executive.

Police performance is vital in consolidated democracies (Bayley 2006), but even more so in

emerging democracies or consolidating democratic regimes where system legitimacy is not yet firmly established. Public security institutions in post-transition countries face the daunting task of providing security and enforcing the rule of law while overcoming entrenched public distrust caused by periods of repressive, dictatorial rule where the police served the arm of the state to terrorize citizens (Frühling 2003). Recent literature has pointed out the importance of reforming and strengthening police institutions in order to improve the prospects for democratic consolidation (Bayley 2006; Frühling, Tulchin, and Golding 2003). A limited number of comparative studies have concentrated on police legitimacy and public trust and how attitudes toward the police are related to regime characteristics.² For example, comparing Costa Rica, Mexico, and the United States, Walker and Waterman (2008) found that attitudes toward the police are affected by the degree of regime's consolidation.

In this *AmericasBarometer Insights* report, we empirically explore the impact of perceptions of police misconduct on public support for democracy. We use a selection of variables from the 2008 Americas Barometer survey that tap perceptions of police behavior and test their impact on attitudes related to support for a stable democracy.³ We specifically test if perceptions that the police are involved in crime affect public support for democracy. In this assessment, we also include measures of

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¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/AmericasBarometerInsightsSeries>.

The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/datasets>

² Research in this general area has largely relied on case studies in Latin America (Bailey and Dammert 2007); post-communist Europe (Caparini and Marenin 2004); and other regions of the world (Hinton and Newburn 2009).

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perceptions of police corruption and police abuse as proxies of police misbehavior.⁴

Police misconduct is considered a critical problem in Latin America. News about police involvement in power abuse, corruption, extrajudicial killings, and organized crime rings are frequent in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Venezuela. Moreover, the problem of police misconduct is not uncommon in other Latin American countries as well (Beltrán 2007).

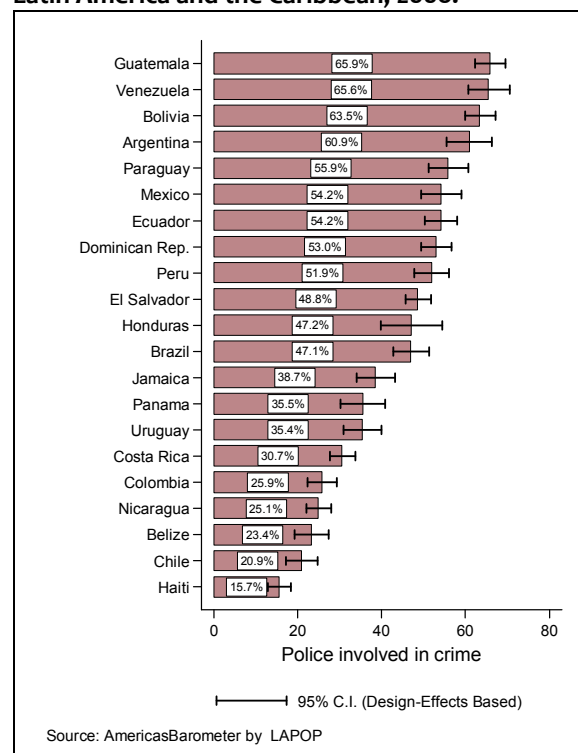
People's perceptions of police involvement in criminal activities can be a good way to measure police misconduct as it not only picks up perceptions of criminal activities perpetrated by police officers but, as Paul Chevigny (2003) argues, it can also reflect the degree of corruption and abuse that people face from their local police. The 2008 survey included a question that directly tapped into perceptions of police involvement in crime as opposed to their role protecting people from crime. The question read as follows: **AOJ18.** "Some people say that the police in this neighborhood (town, village) protect people from criminals, while others say that it is the police that are involved in crime. What do you think? (1) Police protect; (2) Police involved in crime."

This question was asked to 34,320 persons in twenty-one countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁵ The initial results paint an alarming picture. Over 44 percent of respondents said that their local police were involved in crime, while only 38 percent said their local police protected citizens. The rest (18 percent) said the police did not protect people but neither were they involved in crime. We compared the percentage of people who said that the police were involved

in crime across countries and the results are shown in Figure 1.

In Guatemala, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Argentina, more than 60 percent of the surveyed populations think that their local police are involved in criminal activities. The outlook is not positive in many other countries either. In most nations, the proportion of people who view the police with concern is above 30 percent. Only in Colombia, Nicaragua, Belize, Chile, and Haiti, are negative views on the police below 30 percent.

Figure 1.
Perceptions of Police Involvement in Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008.



Do these views have an impact on support for democracy? When we consider countries that are struggling to consolidate democracy and the establishment of the rule of law, this question is even more pressing. In order to assess the relationship between these views and people's support for democracy, we conducted two regression analyses.

⁴ See Chevigny (2003) for a detailed account on the relationship between police corruption, police abuse, and impunity.

⁵ The question was not asked in Canada, Guyana, and the United States. The non-response rate for this question in the overall sample of twenty-one countries was 10.9%.

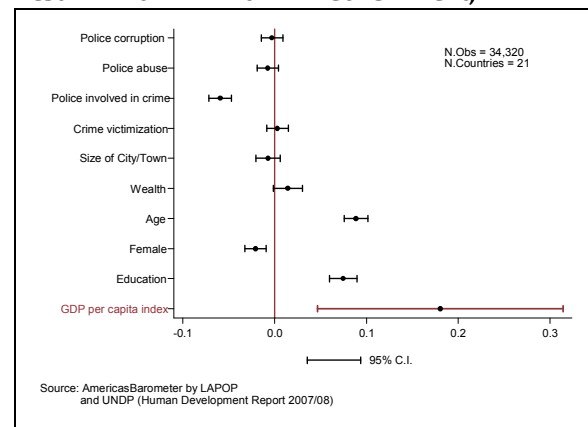
The Impact of Police Misconduct on Support for Democracy

We use opinions concerning police involvement in crime as a proxy for police misconduct.⁶ We test whether this variable, along with reports of police abuse and police corruption,⁷ decreases support for democracy, measured in the Churchillian notion that democracy may have problems but it is better than any other form of government.⁸ We included variables of gender, age, education, wealth, size of the city where the respondent lived as controls, and—acknowledging the possible impact of crime in the relationship between police performance and democracy—we added crime victimization in the equation as well. Because country wealth plays a fundamental role in democratic survival (Przeworski et al 2000), we also incorporated countries' GDP index per capita into the regression and ran a multilevel linear analysis.⁹

In Figure 2, we show graphically the standardized coefficient of each variable using a dot around the vertical "0" line (in red). If the dot falls to the right of the "0" line, it implies a positive impact, as in the cases of "age" and the "education." If the dot falls into the left zone of the "0" axis, as in "female" and "police involved

in crime", it means a negative impact on the dependent variable (support for democracy). The horizontal lines crossing each dot represent the confidence intervals: only when the confidence intervals do not overlap the "0" axis we can say the variable is statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Figure 2.
Determinants of Support for Democracy as the Best Form of Government, 2008



Results in Figure 2 show that perceptions of police involvement in crime affect support for democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean: the more people see the police as involved in crime, the less they think democracy is better than any other form of government. Other police variables showed no statistical significance in this regression, and neither did crime victimization. GDP per capita index turns out to be the most important single predictor for support for democratic government. Other important factors are the following: age (older people tend to show more support for democracy); gender (males appear more supportive of democracy); and education (as expected, well educated people tend to support more a democratic form of government). Even with these controls in the model, it is important to note that, as expected, our measure of police misconduct remains a significant factor.

We also test the impact of police misconduct on support for democracy using a more elaborate dependent variable. We made use of the

⁶ Another option might be to use the commonly employed trust in police measure, but the item used here more directly taps perceptions of problematic behavior.

⁷ Police abuse was measured using the following item: VIC27. "In the past 12 months has any police officer abused you verbally, physically or assaulted you?" Police corruption was measured with item EXC2: "Has a police official ask you for bribe during the past year?" For a detailed account of these items, see previous issues of the *AmericasBarometer Insight* series: Orcés (2008) and Cruz (2009).

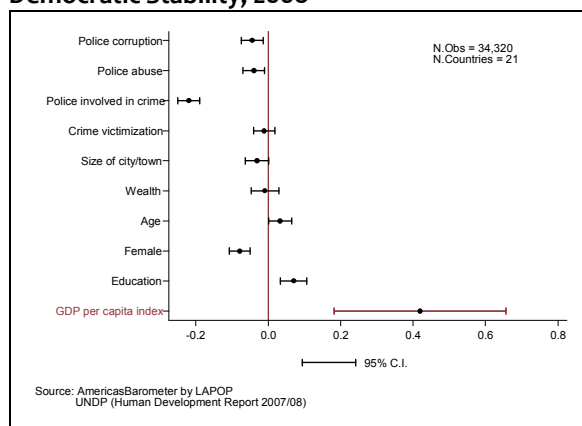
⁸ The question was framed as follows: ING4. "Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with these statements?"

⁹ All statistical analyses reported in this article were conducted using Stata v10, and they are adjusted to consider the effects of complex sample design.

measure of support for stable democracy developed by Seligson (2000). This variable is a composite index of measures of system support and political tolerance. The theory behind this variable maintains that those countries that combine high levels of system support and political tolerance among their populations have better prospects for stable democracy than those which combine low levels of each factor. Regarding the impact of police performance, we expect that police misconduct will negatively affect a political culture supportive of democratic stability.

Figure 3 shows the results of a multilevel logit regression analysis using democratic political culture as a dependent variable. We repeated the same model used in Figure 2 and found confirmation of our expectations. Again, police involvement in crime stands out as an important factor, one that is detrimental to democratic political culture in Latin America and the Caribbean. In addition, direct police abuse and corruption victimization by the police also affect negatively the prospects for democratic system support. In other words, where the police are perceived to be involved in crime, accept bribes, and abuse the population, the prospects for a supportive population toward democracy are significantly lower.

Figure 3.
Determinants of Political Attitudes that Support Democratic Stability, 2008



In sum, these findings provide evidence concerning the importance of police performance to democratic consolidation. To be sure, a law-abiding police is not a sufficient condition for democratic consolidation; but a corrupted police is a significant hindrance for democratic governance. Police misconduct not only affects the rule of law and hinders the provision of order, security, and justice. It also undermines the basis of a regime's legitimacy in environments already troubled by poverty, inequality, and violence.

Policy and Program Implications

The implications of these findings are clear. Police institutions are important for democratic consolidation. They not only enforce law and grant order. They also help to build legitimacy for the regime as they fulfill one of the main functions of the modern state, namely, that of providing security.

Thus, police reform emerges as a fundamental project for democratic consolidation, especially in those countries with a protracted legacy of authoritarianism and human rights abuses. However, the pressing need to tackle rising levels of crime and to placate subsequent popular outcry have not helped to strengthen police institutions in the region.

In some cases, as in Central America for instance, frequent arrests of high level police officers who have been involved in organized crime rings while themselves leading the all-out war against gangs suggest, for example, that the scope of police reforms have been hindered by the very efforts expended in carrying out draconian wars against gang-led crime. Ironically, the *mano dura* programs, based on a particular interpretation of zero tolerance policies originating in the United States, arguably have ended up strengthening corrupted and abusive elements within the police. These groups have undermined efforts at

developing professional and transparent institutions in many post-transition countries.

Hence, as we have argued in previous issues of the *AmericasBarometer Insights*, police reform not only should entail the strengthening of criminal investigation and the improvement of technical capabilities; it also must involve the development of transparent and accountable institutions. In that regard, international cooperation programs, such as the Plan Mérida,¹⁰ should put democratic policing at the center of the strategy to combat crime, drugs, and gangs in the region.

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¹⁰ Also called the Mérida Initiative, this is a security cooperation program among the governments of the United States, México, and the Central American countries, focused on combating transnational organized crime.