

# Those with darker skin report slower police response throughout the Americas

By Mollie J. Cohen, Elizabeth J. Zechmeister and Mitchell A. Seligson February 9

*The following is guest post from Vanderbilt University political scientists [Mollie J. Cohen](#), [Elizabeth J. Zechmeister](#), and [Mitchell A. Seligson](#). See their newest [Americas Barometer Topical Brief](#) [here](#).*

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The shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, [Mo.](#) and public [protests](#) in reaction to the Eric Garner case verdict in New York (among [other](#) recent [events](#)) put a spotlight on race relations and policing in the United States. Fueled by the [#BlackLivesMatter](#) movement, as a nation we have been confronting the fact that African Americans [trust](#) the police less and give [poorer evaluations](#) of various aspects [of police performance](#), compared to their white counterparts.

For many years, journalists and scholars alike have argued that race issues are a problem [particular to the U.S.](#), and that race-based discrimination is not nearly as severe for our neighbors in [Latin America](#). Yet, increasingly, academic [studies](#) reveal that darker skin is associated with unequal opportunities and treatment across the Americas. Our own past research with the Latin American Public Opinion Project ([LAPOP](#)) has found that individuals who identify as racial or ethnic minorities report more [experiences with](#)

[discrimination](#). As scholars of comparative politics, we wanted to know: Is there a connection between the color of one's skin and evaluations of police responsiveness outside the U.S.?

Unfortunately, the answer is yes. Across the Latin America and Caribbean region, individuals of darker skin tone frequently feel discriminated against by the police. In a [recent study of this topic](#), we find that skin tone predicts perceptions of police response time.

The data for our study come from the 2014 AmericasBarometer by LAPOP. In nationally representative face-to-face surveys, individuals from over 20 countries across Latin America and the Caribbean were asked: "Suppose someone enters your home to burglarize it and you call the police. How long do you think it would take the police to arrive at your house on a typical day around noon?"

The statistics stand as bleak testimony to deficiencies in police protection of citizen security across Latin America and the Caribbean. The pie chart shows the distribution of responses to the question for the region. On average, only 10 percent of individuals report that the police would arrive in "less than 10 minutes." Approximately 2 out of every 5 individuals believe that the police would take more than an hour to respond, with some of those asserting that the police would never arrive. These figures stand in stark contrast to those we found in our [survey of the United States](#), where nearly 85 percent of respondents indicated that the police would arrive in less than 30 minutes (and 41 percent said that the police would arrive in less than 10 minutes).

Our research shows that those who live in urban areas and who are wealthier tend to respond that the police would arrive more quickly than those in rural areas and those who are poor. This is not surprising, as wealthier and more urban areas tend to be more easily accessible to law enforcement officials. But what about skin tone? In our surveys, the interviewer records the skin tone of the respondents on an eleven-point scale. Does the

color of an individual's skin matter when considering perceived response times?

We find that on average across the region, individuals with darker skin tones believe that it would take longer for the police to respond to a call reporting a burglary, compared to individuals who are otherwise similar but whose skin tone is light. This result holds even when we account for other likely predictors of police response time, including wealth, education, urban versus rural residence, and country of residence.

Given that it is impossible to see skin tone over the phone when a citizen calls for police assistance, what might account for this relationship? We believe two factors could be at play. First, residential clustering by factors such as race is not unique to the [U.S.](#) It could be that police attentiveness to neighborhoods varies by their perception of the racial or ethnic profile of residents. Second, given historical and current patterns of [discrimination](#) and unequal opportunity across the Americas, those with darker skin tones may simply tend toward believing the police would be less responsive to their calls for assistance, regardless of whether this is, in fact, the case. These existing patterns of discrimination by skin tone may undergird a reality in which the police are slower to respond to areas where those with darker skin reside and/or may lead darker skinned individuals to believe the police would be slower to respond to their calls.

Whether based in reality, in perceptions fueled by other experiences with discrimination, or both, the link between skin tone and beliefs about police responsiveness in Latin America and the Caribbean matters. Not surprisingly, our analyses show that those who believe the police will take longer to respond are less satisfied with local law enforcement.

We note that the relationship we find for skin tone and perceived police responsiveness varies across locations in the Latin America and Caribbean region: in some countries the relationship is quite strong (e.g., Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, and El Salvador), while in other cases it is negligible (e.g., Brazil and Nicaragua). This does not mean that issues of discrimination are absent from those latter countries, but it does underscore the

significant heterogeneity that we frequently find in our studies of attitudes and behaviors across the Latin America and Caribbean region.

As the U.S. seeks to overcome the racial gap in trust in the police, our research shows that these types of issues are not confined to our country alone. Rather, the color of one's skin is relevant to discussions of police-community relations across many parts of the Americas.

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