



AmericasBarometer Insights, 2008 (No. 3)

# Corruption Victimization by the Police

By Diana Orces, Ph.D. candidate  
[diana.m.orces@Vanderbilt.edu](mailto:diana.m.orces@Vanderbilt.edu)  
Vanderbilt University

Corruption has become one of the main policy issues in emerging democracies around the globe. Corruption has many definitions, but one well-known is “the provision of material benefits to politicians and public officials in exchange for illicit influence over their decisions” (Weyland 1998: 109). Corruption has become a salient problem not only because of its demonstrated significant negative effects on the economy (Elliot 1997) but also because corruption generates economic inefficiencies and inequality that can lead to ineffective government (Rose-Ackerman 1999), which in turn erodes the belief in the legitimacy of the political system (Burbano de Lara 2005; Canache & Allison 2005; Seligson 2002).

This paper in the *AmericasBarometer Insight Series* looks at one of eleven questions on corruption victimization asked in the 2008 round of the Latin American Public Opinion Project survey (others will be examined in future *Insights* studies)<sup>1</sup>. This survey involved face-to-face

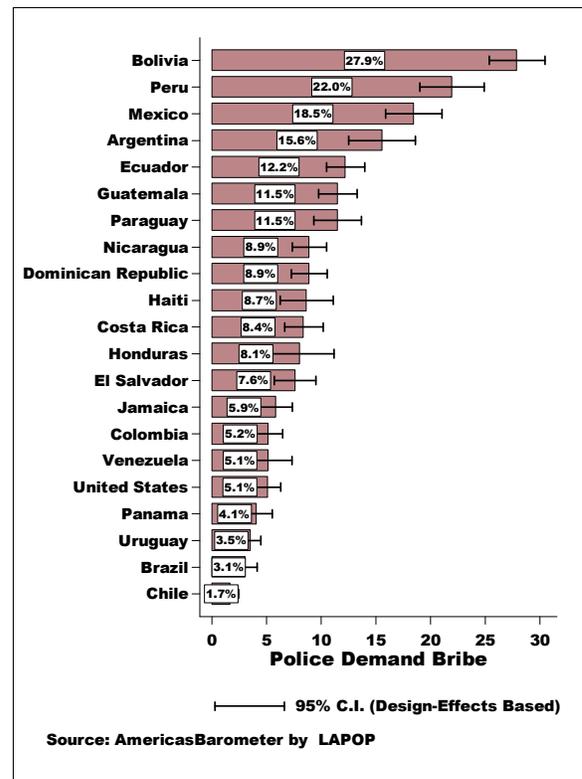
<sup>1</sup> Prior issues in the Insight series can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublicati>

interviews conducted in most of Latin America and the Caribbean, and a web survey in the United States, totaling national probability samples of 21 nations<sup>2</sup>. A total of 34,469 respondents were asked the same question:

**EXC2.** Has a police officer asked you for a bribe during the past year?

Figure 1, which exhibits percentages of the population that were asked a bribe by the police, indicates a wide range of corruption victimization across countries.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1.**  
Percentage of the Population Victimized by Corruption by the Police at least once in the past year in the Americas, 2008



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

<sup>2</sup> This question was not asked in Canada and the Belize data are not available as of this writing.

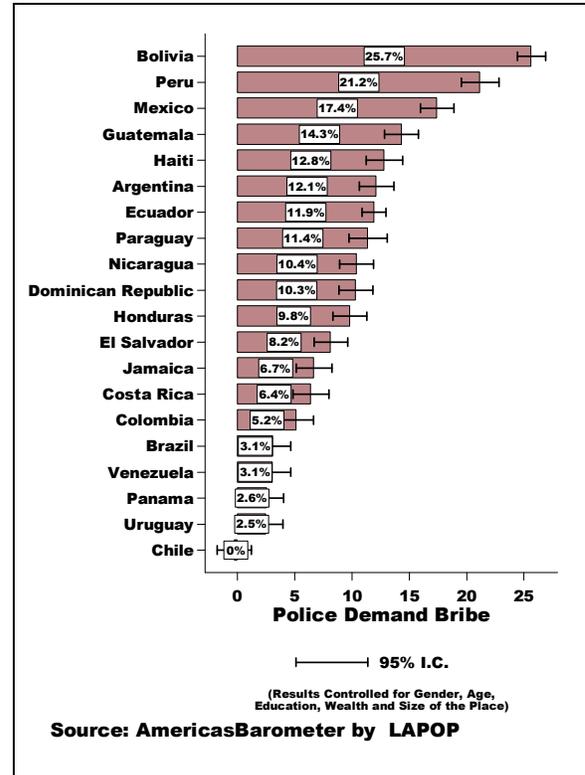
<sup>3</sup> Non-response was 7.5% for the sample as a whole.

Bolivia shows a significantly higher percentage of its population being victimized by the police (27.9%), while at the other end of the continuum Chile reveals the lowest percentage in the sample of corruption victimization (1.7%). Similarly, over 15 percent of the population in Peru, Mexico, and Argentina was demanded a bribe by the police.

It is noteworthy that there is a statistically significant negative correlation between trust in the police and corruption victimization by the police in Latin America and the Caribbean. Since people’s experience with corruption by the police may negatively affect how they view this institution overall, mainly decreasing their levels of trust, this in turn may have a negative effect on the legitimacy of the political system. Consequently, it is important to know who are those most likely to be victims of corruption.

More specifically, how much the variation of corruption victimization by the police across countries is explained by the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the populations of these countries? To simplify the answer to this question, the United States was removed from the sample in order to avoid any statistical biases given that this case has an extremely high level of socio-economic development compared to the other countries, possibly driving the results of the analysis. After controlling for traditional socio-economic variables, such as gender, age, education and wealth, the results shown in Figure 2 remain similar to those shown in the previous figure, with variation of only a few percentages higher or lower. Countries such as Bolivia, Peru, and Mexico continue to demonstrate the highest percentages of corruption victimization by the police even after controlling for individual characteristics.

**Figure 2.** Percentage of the Population Victimized by Corruption by the Police at least once in the past year after Taking into Account Individual Characteristics in the Americas, 2008.



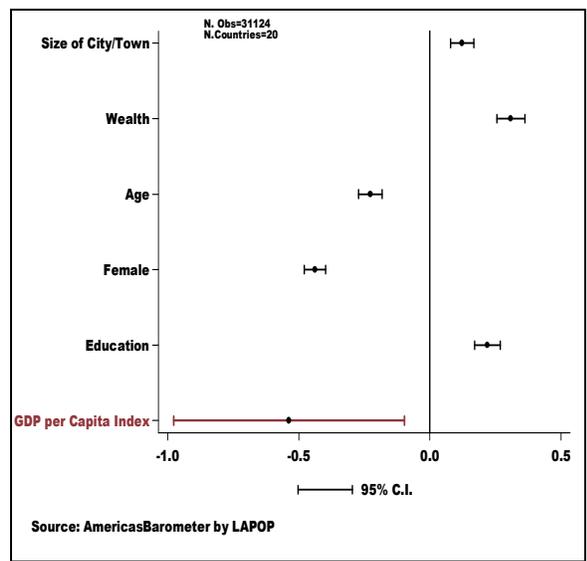
## Do Contextual Factors Matter?

We find that not only do the characteristics of individuals matter for corruption, but richer nations are better able to control corruption. Figure 3 illustrates the effects of both individual level characteristics as well as GDP per capita on the probability of being asked a bribe by the police. Each variable included in the analysis is listed on the vertical (y) axis. The impact of each of those variables on experience with corruption victimization by the police is shown graphically by a dot, which if located to the right of the vertical “0” line indicates a positive effect, and if to the left of the “0” line a negative effect. If the effects are statistically significant, they are shown by confidence interval lines stretching to the left and right of each dot that do not overlap the vertical “0” line (at .05 or better). If they overlap the vertical line, the effects are

statistically insignificant. The relative strength of each variable is indicated by standardized coefficients.

Figure 3 demonstrates that all individual characteristics as well as the national-level variable, GDP per capita, matter in determining the likelihood of people being victimized by police corruption. Individuals, who are wealthier, highly educated, and living in bigger cities, are more likely to be asked bribes by the police. On the other hand, females and older individuals are less likely to be victims of corruption. National per capita wealth has an important impact on the likelihood of being asked a bribe by the police. More specifically, the wealthier the country in per capita terms, the less likely individuals in these countries are to be victimized by corruption, whereas average citizens of poorer countries are more likely to be victimized.

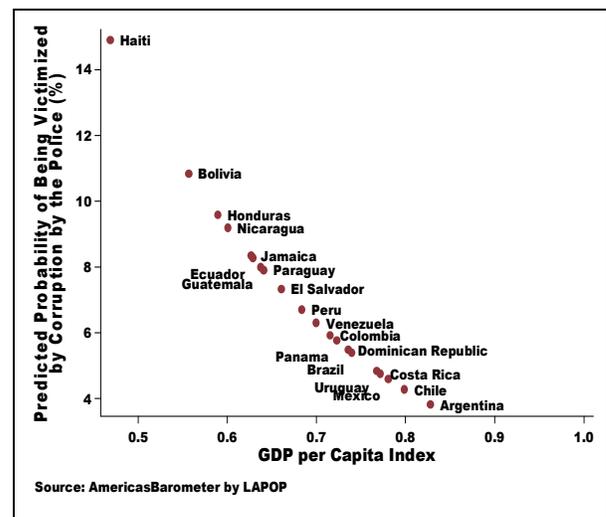
**Figure 3.**  
A Multilevel Analysis of the Determinants of Corruption Victimization by the Police in the Americas: The Impact of Economic Development, 2008



The significance of the national context is underscored in detail in Figure 4; the higher the GDP per capita, the less likely the average citizen is to become a victim of corruption. For instance, Haiti is the country that shows the highest probability of corruption victimization

by the police and is the country with the lowest economic development. At the other extreme, Argentina demonstrates the lowest probability of corruption victimization by the police and the highest level of economic development. Taking all these results together, if a citizen from Haiti with a given set of socio-economic characteristics moves to Argentina, all other things being equal, and none of his/her individual characteristics change, the probability of this person being asked a bribe by the police is at least 10 percentage points lower than if this individual were to remain in Haiti. Another country that shows a high probability of being victimized by corruption by the police is Bolivia, not surprisingly, a country with a low level of economic development.

**Figure 4.**  
The Impact of Economic Development on Corruption Victimization by the Police in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008<sup>4</sup>



## Policy Implications

With the end of authoritarian rule in many Latin American countries, a critical question facing scholars of democratization is the

<sup>4</sup> The differences between countries in Figure 2 and 4 are explained partly by the fact that Figure 2 controls for individual level characteristics while Figure 4 takes into account GDP per capita.

durability and quality of democracy in the region. Yet with corruption being one of the most prevalent problems in the region, it is not only important to know how corruption may erode the sustainability and quality of these democracies, but also who are those most likely to be victims of corruption. This paper has found that some individual level characteristics are as important as at least one national level characteristic in explaining corruption victimization. In this case, we looked specifically at corruption by the police. The results demonstrate that individuals living in wealthier countries are less likely to be victims of corruption, whereas the probability is notably higher for the average citizen in poor countries. It is worth mentioning that the majority of Latin American and Caribbean countries demonstrate a negative statistically significant correlation between corruption victimization by the police and trust in the police, rendering some support to the notion that at the individual level, the experience with corruption victimization has a negative effect on people's levels of trust in this institution. Yet it is also important to note that at the country level, this relationship may not hold as those who have not being asked a bribe by the police may also show low levels of trust in this institution. It is often the case that in many poor countries the police are involved in superior levels of corruption or crime and not necessarily minor corruption, which in turn may affect negatively people's views of this institution as a whole, regardless if they experience direct corruption victimization or not. We conclude, therefore, that anti-corruption programs are likely to be most successful when they combine localized action, such as working

to professionalize police forces, with broader attempts to increase economic development in poor countries in order to lower corruption victimization by the police while increasing trust in this institution.

## References

- Burbano de Lara F. 2005. Coaliciones fantasmas, esencialismos políticos y corrupción. *Iconos* 9:105-12
- Canache D, Allison ME. 2005. Perceptions of Political Corruption in Latin American Democracies. *Latin American Politics and Society* 47:91-111
- Elliot KA, ed. 1997. *Corruption and the Global Economy*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for International Economics
- Mauro P. 1995. Corruption and Growth. *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 100:681-712
- Rose-Ackerman S. 1999. *Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences and Reform*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press
- Seligson M. 2002. The Impact of Corruption on Regime Legitimacy: A Comparative Study of Four Latin American Countries. *The Journal of Politics* 64:408-33
- Weyland K. 1998. The Politics of Corruption in Latin America. *Journal of Democracy* 9:108-21