



AmericasBarometer Insights: 2009 (No.11)\*

# Police Abuse in Latin America

José Miguel Cruz  
jose.m.cruz@vanderbilt.edu  
Vanderbilt University

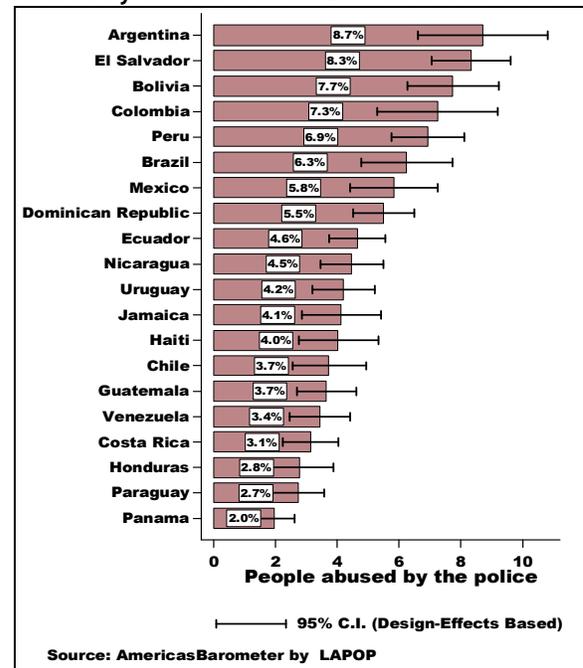
The last great wave of democratization in Latin America not only brought change in electoral institutions, parties, legislatures, and presidential offices, but it also resulted in significant reforms in the states' security apparatuses. Policing institutions play a fundamental role in any kind of regime; in both democratic and authoritarian contexts, the police carry the burden of keeping order and internal security under control (Marenin 1996). The transitions to democracy in several Latin American countries entailed the reform of policing institutions in order to help guarantee and promote the rule of law under democratic rules (see Fruhling and Tulchin 2003). As Bailey and Godson (2000) assert, the police play a fundamental role in democratization as new regimes need at least minimal levels of security and order, but need to achieve that within the context of protecting human rights (Marenin 1996; Cruz 2006).

Much of police reform in the Americas has been aimed at changing the ways in which the police

interact with citizens (Bailey and Dammert 2005). As the police were one of the protagonists of political repression during the period of authoritarian regimes, one of the objectives of the reforms has been to reduce police brutality and thereby to increase public trust in the police. To what extent has this objective been accomplished? To what extent do police institutions mistreat or abuse their citizens in the pursuit of security and order?

The AmericasBarometer survey provides an opportunity to assess police behavior in the Americas from the perspective of voting age citizens<sup>1</sup>. This report in the AmericasBarometer Insights series seeks to answer these questions based in the 2008 database. The wording of the question used to measure police abuse is as follows: VIC27. In the past 12 months has any police officer abused you verbally, physically or assaulted you?[If "yes"] How many times?

Figure 1. Percentage of People Reporting Having Been Abused by the Police in the Last Twelve Months



\* The Insights Series is co-edited by Professors Mitchell A. Seligson and Elizabeth Zechmeister with administrative, technical, and intellectual support from the LAPOP group at Vanderbilt.

<sup>1</sup> Prior issues in the Insights series can be found in <http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/AmericasBarometerInsightsSeries>. The data on which they are based can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/datasets>.

The survey containing the question about police mistreatment was carried out in twenty Latin American and Caribbean countries<sup>2</sup>, and it was answered by 32,853 respondents.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1 shows the percentage of people who have been victim of police mistreatment at least once in the last twelve months. As can be seen, there are important differences in the percentage of population abused by the police across the region. Argentina, El Salvador, Bolivia, and Colombia report the highest levels of police abuse. In these countries more than 7 percent of the population reported having been a victim of police mistreatment. In most of the countries police misconduct varies between 3 and 7 percent. However, in Honduras, Paraguay, and Panama, respondents reported less than 3 percent of abuse from police agents. Of course, these data need to be placed in the perspective of the presence of the police force. In countries with very low per capita number of police officers, for example, the opportunity for police abuse, *ceteris paribus*, is lower than when the police forces are denser. This is also a factor that varies within nations, with police forces usually concentrated more in urban than rural areas.

Police abuse is measured broadly here and the differences in the results account for the frequency of such behavior in a twelve-month period. The differences we find across countries, however, might be the result of demographic patterns that influence the outcome per country. In order to control for those characteristics, the results were examined net of variables like age, gender, education, and wealth. A new ranking is showed in Figure 2.

As can be seen, the results do not change substantively except for the fact that El Salvador

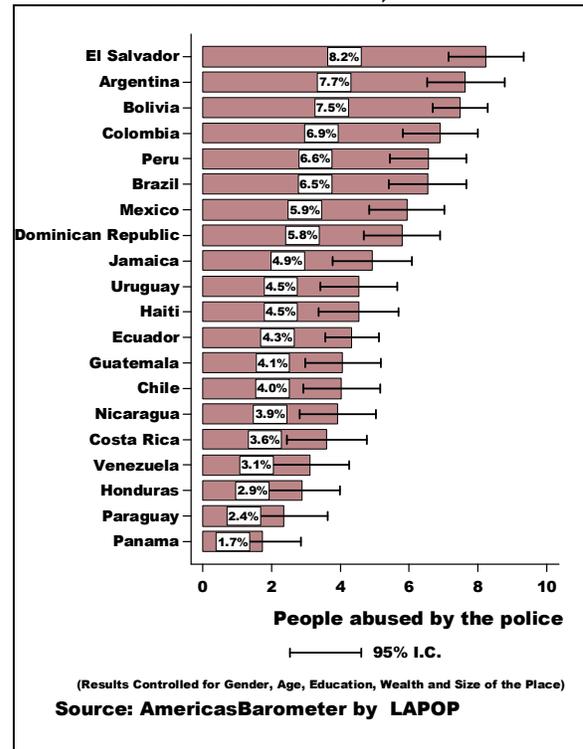
<sup>2</sup> Funding for the 2008 series mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Center for the Americas, and Vanderbilt University.

<sup>3</sup> The non-response rate for this question was 2.6%.

now has the dubious distinction of topping the list.

Examined more closely, these results raise important questions about the scope of police reforms in some countries. In El Salvador, as well as in Argentina, efforts were made to carry out police reforms after the transitions to democracy. The Salvadoran reforms have been praised as one of the most comprehensive and ambitious sets in the region (Call 2003), whereas some authors point to the Argentinean efforts as clearly unsuccessful (Hinton 2006). In any case, these results suggest that in both countries, as well as in several other Latin American countries, there is still a long way to go in order to reduce police misconduct against citizens.

**Figure 2.**  
Percentage of People Who Report Having Been Abused by the Police in the Last Twelve Months, Taking into Account Individual Characteristics in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



## Factors Associated with Police Abuse

Which factors are associated with victimization perpetrated by the police in Latin America? Research in different parts of the world has shown that police abuse is more frequent against some segments of the population. Young urban males are, for example, the most frequent victims of police action in countries as different as Brazil, Chile, Nigeria, and Russia (Ramos 2006; Gerber and Mendelson 2008). Also, police misconduct is usually more common against political opponents of the regime (Marenin 1996).

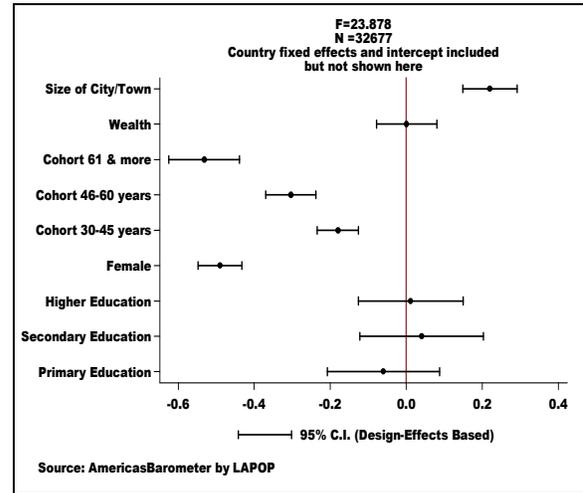
A logistic regression performed on the Americas Barometer 2008 database<sup>4</sup> shows that gender, age, and the size of city, are all socio-demographic variables associated with police abuse (see Figure 3).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, we find that corruption, crime victimization, citizen participation, and political engagement<sup>6</sup> were also associated with misconduct perpetrated by the police (see Figure 4). In the case of citizen participation and political engagement, the results show that those respondents who were more active in civic participation and more engaged politically turn out also to be more likely to be victims of police abuse, suggesting that there may be a political motive to the abuse (these results are already controlled for socio-economic and demographic factors).

<sup>4</sup> All statistical analyses reported in this article were conducted using Stata v10, and they are adjusted to consider the effects of complex sample design.

<sup>5</sup> Dummy variables for each country were included, using Uruguay as base-category.

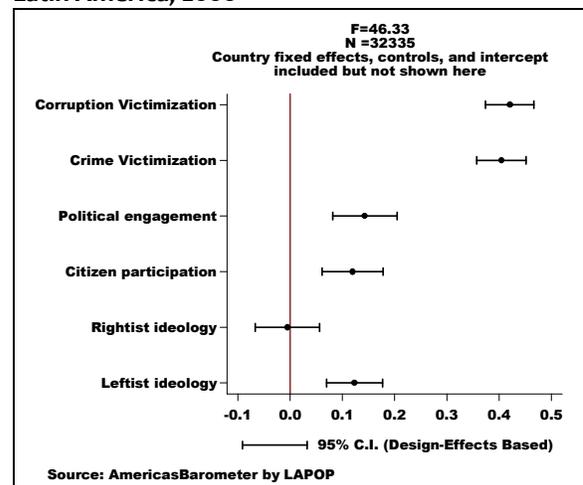
<sup>6</sup> Political engagement is a composite variable created using two items included in the AmericasBarometer. These items are: **POL1**. How much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, little or none?, and **POL2**. How often do you discuss politics with other people: Daily; A few times a week; A few times a month; Rarely or Never? The responses were recorded in a 0-to-100 scale, and then averaged out. A 100 score represents the higher level of political engagement.

**Figure 3.**  
Demographic and Socioeconomic Determinants of Victimization by Police Abuse in Latin America, 2008



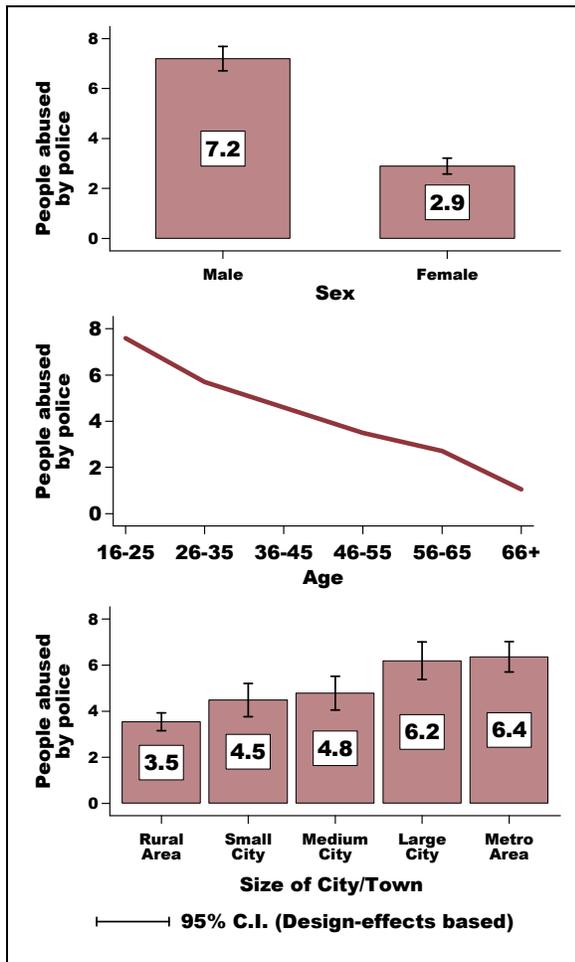
In fact, the results also show that political ideology plays a role in police abuse. People that identified themselves as leaning toward the political left reported to be more likely to have been victimized by the police, than those of centrist and rightist ideology (centrist ideology is the base group and not showed in the regression). This finding also suggests that police behavior is still motivated by political and ideological stances in Latin America, long after the days of right-wing military regimes have passed.

**Figure 4.**  
Determinants of Victimization by Police Abuse in Latin America, 2008



Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the nature of the relationships between some significant variables and the variable of abuse by the police. As shown in Figure 5, females are substantially less likely to be victimized by the police than males: 7.2% of males have been victims of police misconduct, whereas only 2.9% of females have been victims. Also, as expected, young people are more frequently abused than older people. In this case, it is important to note that people under 25 years of age tend to be victimized by the police nearly four times more than people older than 66 years.

**Figure 5.**  
**Percentage of People Abused by Police according to Sex, Age, and Size of Town, in Latin America, 2008**



The size of city where the respondent lives also increases the likelihood of mistreatment by the

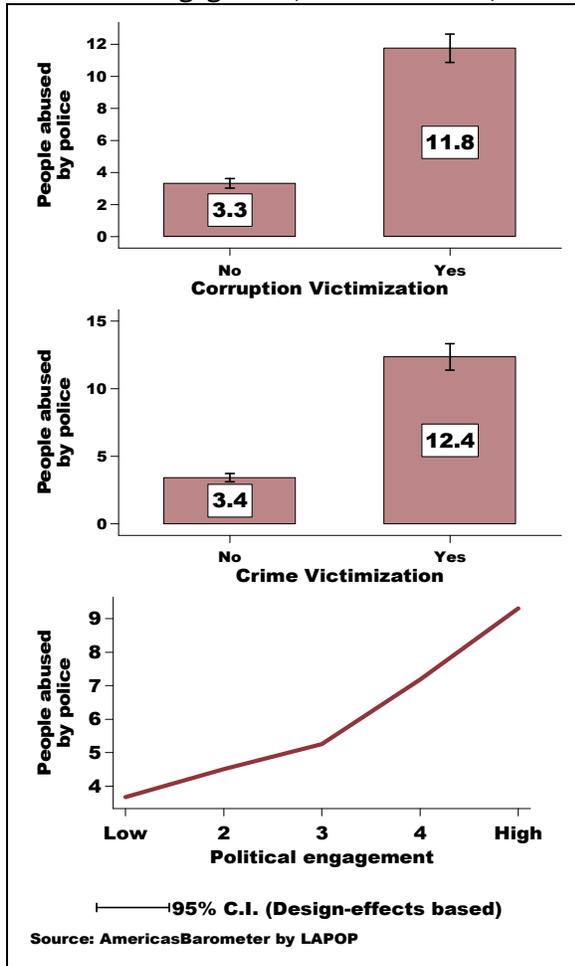
police: the results show that, holding other variables constant, police misconduct against citizens increases in larger cities; in the raw data, 6.4% of the people who live in metropolitan areas have been victimized by the police, against 3.5% of people who live in rural areas.

All of these results confirm what other studies have suggested concerning police behavior in the streets. Police tend to victimize males and young people in urban areas more than any other demographic group. This is because most of the crime fighting effort is directed against what is usually considered the typical delinquent profile.

But more interesting is the relationship between other types of victimization and being a victim of police misconduct. The graphs in Figure 6 show that people victimized by corruption and by crime are more likely to be also victimized by the police. There are two ways of explaining this relationship. One is that people victimized by crime or corruption tend to get in contact with police more frequently than the rest of citizens; this relationship exposes them to more mistreatment than the average citizen. The other explanation—which does not necessarily rule out the former—points to the fact that some of the reported corruption and crime victimization might be actually perpetrated by the police. Police mistreatment can also be a bribe or an assault perpetrated by a police officer.

In any case, the likelihood of being a victim of police mistreatment not only rests on other kinds of victimization. It also seems to be associated to the political activity of citizens. As pointed out before, people with higher levels of political involvement tend to be more frequently abused by the police than the citizen who is not involved in politics. Such results suggest that police behavior is still influenced by political considerations in some countries in Latin America.

**Figure 6.**  
**Percentage of People Abused by Police according to Corruption Victimization, Crime Victimization, and Political Engagement, in Latin America, 2008**



## Policy and Program Implications

These findings point to two important policy implications. First, they show the value of using an instrument of academic research to assess programs of institutional strengthening. Police reforms have taken place in several countries in the region, and scientific surveys like the AmericasBarometer 2008 can serve as a tool to evaluate, from the perspective of citizens, the impact of such reforms. In other words, surveys can be useful to evaluate and restructure policies regarding security institutions. Secondly, the results show that further work is needed with the police forces in Latin America. Despite

several reforms in the security sector, some countries still need reform in their security apparatuses. In some countries, police forces are still attached to partisan politics and to unprofessional practices in the fight against crime. Police reforms should be deepened and extended across the region in order to advance democracy.

## References

- Bailey, John and Lucía Dammert. 2006. *Public security and police reform in the Americas*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Bailey, John and Roy Godson. 2000. *Organized Crime & Democratic Governability. Mexico and the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Call, Charles T. 2003. "Democratisation, War, and State-Building: Constructing the Rule of Law in El Salvador". *Journal of Latin American Studies* 35 (4): 827-862.
- Cruz, José Miguel. 2006. "Violence, citizen insecurity, and elite maneuvering in El Salvador". In *Public security and police reform in the Americas*, ed. John Bailey and Lucía Dammert. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Fruhling, Hugo and Joseph Tulching. *Crime and Violence in Latina America. Citizen's Security, Democracy and the State*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Gerber, Theodore P., and Sarah E. Mendelson. 2008. "Public Experiences of Police Violence and Corruption in Contemporary Russia: A Case of Predatory Policing?". *Law and Society Review* 42 (1): 1-43.

Hinton, Mercedes. 2006. *The State on the Streets: Police and Politics in Argentina and Brazil*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Marenin, Otwin. 1996. "Changing police, policing change: some thematic questions". In. *Changing police, policing change. International Perspectives*, ed. Otwin Marenin. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.

Ramos, Silvia. 2006. "Young people, violence, and the police". *Boletim Segurança e cidadania* 12: 1-16.

## Appendices

**Table 1.**  
**Socio-Demographic Determinants of Police Mistreatment in the Americas, 2008**

|                        | Has police abused you? |          |
|------------------------|------------------------|----------|
|                        | Coefficients           | (t)      |
| Primary Education      | -0.060                 | (-0.79)  |
| Secondary Education    | 0.041                  | (0.49)   |
| Higher Education       | 0.012                  | (0.17)   |
| Female                 | -0.490*                | (-16.74) |
| Cohort 30-45           | -0.180*                | (-6.47)  |
| Cohort 46-60           | -0.303*                | (-9.02)  |
| Cohort 61 and more     | -0.532*                | (-11.23) |
| Wealth                 | 0.001                  | (0.03)   |
| Size of City/Town      | 0.220*                 | (6.06)   |
| Mexico                 | 0.061                  | (1.69)   |
| Guatemala              | -0.020                 | (-0.51)  |
| El Salvador            | 0.136*                 | (4.41)   |
| Honduras               | -0.091*                | (-2.00)  |
| Nicaragua              | -0.020                 | (-0.52)  |
| Costa Rica             | -0.045                 | (-1.16)  |
| Panama                 | -0.183*                | (-4.17)  |
| Colombia               | 0.094*                 | (2.45)   |
| Ecuador                | -0.010                 | (-0.22)  |
| Bolivia                | 0.137*                 | (2.97)   |
| Peru                   | 0.078*                 | (2.43)   |
| Paraguay               | -0.100*                | (-2.83)  |
| Chile                  | -0.032                 | (-0.73)  |
| Brazil                 | 0.082*                 | (2.24)   |
| Venezuela              | -0.069                 | (-1.75)  |
| Argentina              | 0.107*                 | (2.87)   |
| Dominican Republic     | 0.061                  | (1.87)   |
| Haiti                  | -0.007                 | (-0.16)  |
| Jamaica                | 0.017                  | (0.40)   |
| Constant               | -3.245*                | (-84.11) |
| F                      | 23.88                  |          |
| Number of observations | 32677                  |          |
| * p<0.05               |                        |          |

**Table 2.**  
**Determinants of Police Mistreatment in the Americas, 2008**

|                          | Has police abused you? |          |
|--------------------------|------------------------|----------|
|                          | Coefficients           | (t)      |
| Leftist ideology         | 0.116*                 | (4.27)   |
| Rightist ideology        | -0.006                 | (-0.18)  |
| Citizen participation    | 0.113*                 | (3.82)   |
| Political engagement     | 0.135*                 | (4.35)   |
| Crime Victimization      | 0.405*                 | (16.97)  |
| Corruption Victimization | 0.421*                 | (17.77)  |
| Primary Education        | -0.074                 | (-0.95)  |
| Secondary Education      | -0.034                 | (-0.40)  |
| higher Education         | -0.133                 | (-1.84)  |
| Female                   | -0.424*                | (-13.87) |
| Cohort 30-45             | -0.229*                | (-7.92)  |
| Cohort 46-60             | -0.330*                | (-9.42)  |
| Cohort 61 and more       | -0.485*                | (-10.09) |
| Wealth                   | -0.061                 | (-1.52)  |
| Size of City/Town        | 0.148*                 | (4.02)   |
| Mexico                   | 0.018                  | (0.50)   |
| Guatemala                | -0.058                 | (-1.43)  |
| El Salvador              | 0.106*                 | (3.16)   |
| Honduras                 | -0.092*                | (-2.17)  |
| Nicaragua                | -0.036                 | (-0.91)  |
| Costa Rica               | -0.035                 | (-0.89)  |
| Panama                   | -0.111*                | (-2.65)  |
| Colombia                 | 0.114*                 | (2.94)   |
| Ecuador                  | -0.066                 | (-1.39)  |
| Bolivia                  | 0.042                  | (0.82)   |
| Peru                     | 0.031                  | (0.88)   |
| Paraguay                 | -0.128*                | (-3.54)  |
| Chile                    | 0.010                  | (0.24)   |
| Brazil                   | 0.096*                 | (2.48)   |
| Venezuela                | -0.059                 | (-1.50)  |
| Argentina                | 0.074                  | (1.86)   |
| Dominican Republic       | 0.027                  | (0.78)   |
| Haiti                    | -0.105*                | (-2.23)  |
| Jamaica                  | 0.016                  | (0.38)   |
| Constant                 | -3.466*                | (-82.26) |
| F                        | 46.33                  |          |
| Number of Obs.           | 32335                  |          |
| * p<0.05                 |                        |          |