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# Crime and Support for Coups in Latin America<sup>1</sup>

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In a seminal work on the breakdown of democratic regimes, Juan Linz defines legitimacy as "the belief that in spite of shortcomings and failures, the existing political institutions are better than any others that might be established" (Linz 1978: 16). To the extent that individuals view the job performed by democratic governments as effective, they will be less inclined to support extra-constitutional measures. However, when legitimacy declines, citizens may be receptive to new political alternatives, even those that would undermine democracy.<sup>2</sup>

Crime and insecurity have emerged as critical issues in Latin America and the rest of the

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

<sup>2</sup> For an extensive analysis of the impact of legitimacy on democratic values, see Booth and Seligson 2009.

developing world. Studies have shown that citizens view crime as one of the most pressing problems facing their nation (Quann and Kwing 2002)

Table 1 presents data from the World Health Organization's Report on Violence and Health that shows that Latin America has the dubious distinction of having the highest rates of crime and violence in the world. Moreover, according to Alejandro Gaviria and Carmen Pagés, the homicide rates are not only consistently higher in Latin America, but also the differences with the rest of the world are growing larger (Gaviria and Pagés 1999).

**Table 1.**  
Comparison of Homicide Rates around the World

Region	No. of Homicides per 100,000 persons (2000)
<b>Latin America and Caribbean</b>	<b>27.5</b>
United States	6.9
Africa	22.2
Europe*	1.0
Southeast Asia	5.8
Western Pacific	3.4
<b>World</b>	<b>8.8</b>
*Includes only Western European countries Source: World Report on Violence and Health (statistical annex), World Health Organization (WHO), 2002.	

Coinciding with the recent wave of crime in Latin America, the last two decades have seen the rise of a new form of repressive policing called *mano dura*, or "strong hand," as well as relative high levels of support for authoritarian measures. As Orlando J. Pérez (2003) explains:

*Crime undermines support for democratic regimes. As crime rates increase, pressure mounts for "strong" government action which in many instances results in highly repressive and undemocratic measures (638).*

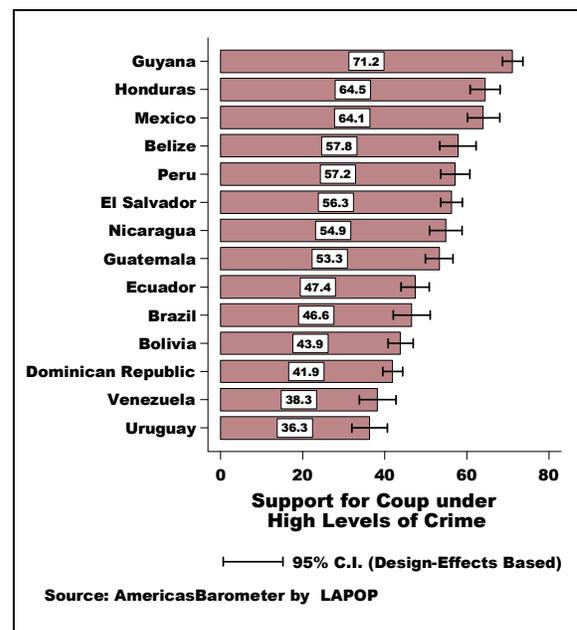
This paper explores the link between crime and support for military coups.<sup>3</sup> Military intervention is the most extreme case of democratic breakdown. If crime, therefore, induces a majority of citizens to support military take-over of power it would indeed represent a very serious threat to democracy. While successful military coups may be rare occurrences, the fact that substantial numbers of citizens could support such action may represent a clear indication of the fragility of democracy in some parts of the region.

### Support for Coups under High Levels of Crime

The 2008 AmericasBarometer<sup>4</sup> survey asked a series of questions measuring the circumstances under which respondents are willing to justify a military coup (see Appendix, Table 1).

This paper focuses on high levels of crime as justification for a military coup. Figure 1 shows the levels of support for a coup under high levels of crime.<sup>5</sup> The results are expressed as the mean on a scale of 0 to 100.

**Figure 1.**  
Support for Military Coup under Conditions of High Levels of Crime



With the exception of Uruguay, Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Ecuador, citizens in the rest of the countries analyzed here express support that averages above 50 on the 0-100 scale for military coups under conditions of high levels of crime. Guyana exhibits the highest level with a mean of 71 on the 0-100 scale, with Honduras and Mexico expressing the next highest support. The support for military coups in Honduras is revealing given the ouster of President Zelaya by the country's military on June 28, 2009. The high proportion of Hondurans who are willing to express support for a coup reflects the volatile and weak state of democratic values in that Central American nation. Moreover, a study by Mitchell A. Seligson and John Booth found that Honduras was "the single case in Latin America with the highest level of triply dissatisfied citizens, with relatively low support for democracy and with high support for coups, confrontational political methods, and rebellion" (Seligson and Booth 2009: 4). Of course, these findings do not mean that those citizens *prefer* military-led governments or would

<sup>3</sup> The data used in this study come from the AmericasBarometer series, involving face-to-face interviews conducted in over 20 nations of North, Central and South America and the Caribbean in 2008.

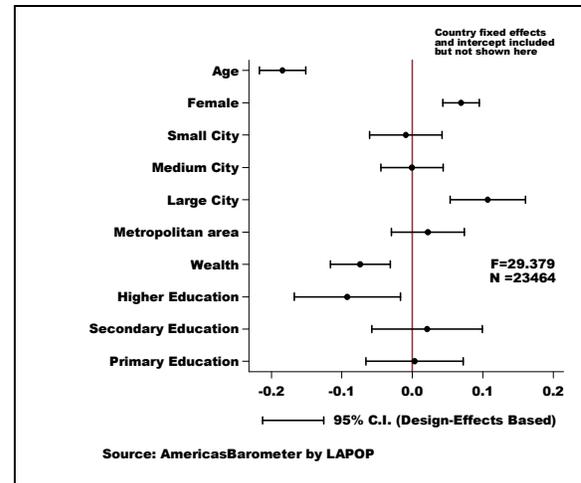
<sup>4</sup>Funding for the AmericasBarometer project is mainly provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Other important sources of support are the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University.

<sup>5</sup> Note that the questions about coup support were not asked in countries without armies.

automatically support a coup. But the fact that such significant numbers could find justifications for a military take-over should concern everyone who is interested in promoting democratic governance in the region. More to the point, the results indicate a large majority of citizens whose concern over crime is so weighty that they are willing to support an alternative political system.

What are the factors that explain support for military coups under conditions of high levels of crime? For that analysis I turn to logistic regression.<sup>6</sup> Here, our dependent variable is the measure of support for military coup under high levels of crime. First we examine the impact of the traditional socio-demographic variables.<sup>7</sup> Figure 2 shows graphically the results of the regression analysis.<sup>8</sup> We find that individuals living in large cities, with lower levels of wealth, less than university education and women are more supportive of military coups. These results parallel those found by José Miguel Cruz (2009) reported in an earlier *Insights* series, for perceptions of insecurity. The conclusion to be drawn is that individuals most affected by levels of insecurity also are most prone to support extreme measures, such as a coup, to combat crime.

**Figure 2.**  
Demographic and Socioeconomic Determinants of Support for Military Coup under Conditions of High Levels of Crime



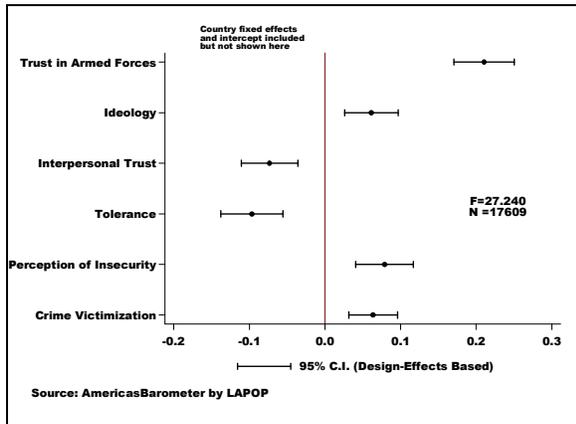
We expect that both crime victimization and perception of personal insecurity would increase support for military coups. Individuals directly affected by crime or most fearful of becoming a victim of crime should exhibit the highest levels of support for extreme measures. The evidence suggests that concern about violent crime in Latin America appears to be so severe that citizens are “willing to sacrifice certain liberties in order to feel more secure” (Tulchin and Ruthenburg 2006:5). Additionally, we expect certain attitudinal variables to also have a significant impact on support for coups under high levels of crime. First, we expect individuals who exhibit greater confidence in the armed forces to be more willing to support military coups. Second, respondents who are ideologically on the right might be expected to express higher support for military coups. Third, lower levels of interpersonal trust and political tolerance should increase support for military interventions. Figure 3 shows that crime and perception of insecurity are significant factors in determining support for military coups. As expected, individuals who have experienced crime directly or who are most insecure in their neighborhoods express greater support for military coups.

<sup>6</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. The coup support question format provided for a dichotomous response (justify or not justify a coup), and therefore logistic regression, rather than OLS regression is required.

<sup>7</sup> The analysis includes a series of dummy variables accounting for the fixed effects of each country. For each respondent a variable is created measured as “1” if the person is from that country or “0” if they are not. By including the country dummy variables we account for the impact that is “fixed” for each respondent. When using this technique we must assign one set of dummy variables as reference, in this case it is Guyana.

<sup>8</sup> Statistical significance is graphically represented by a confidence interval that does not overlap the vertical “0” line (at .05 or better). When the dot, which represents the predicted impact of that variable, falls to the right of the vertical “0” line it implies a positive relationship whereas if it falls to the left it indicates a negative contribution. The appendix shows the regression coefficients.

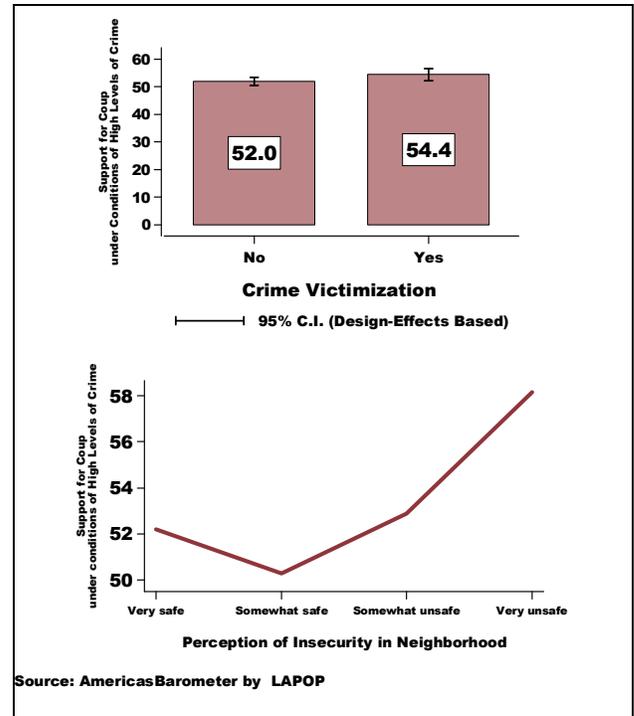
**Figure 3.**  
Determinants of Support for Military Coups under Conditions of High Levels of Crime



Trust in the armed forces also has a significant effect on support for coups. Individuals that express higher confidence in the military exhibit greater support for the armed forces to intervene when levels of crime increase. Ideology also is an important factor, with respondents on the right expressing greater support for military coups. Finally, political tolerance and interpersonal trust also are significant factors. Citizens who exhibit lower levels of interpersonal trust and political tolerance are more likely to support military interventions when high levels of crime affect the nation.

Figure 4 shows that individuals who feel unsafe in their neighborhood and who have been victims of crime are more likely to support interventions by the armed forces.

**Figure 4.**  
Support for Military Coup under Conditions of High Crime according to Perceptions of Insecurity and Crime Victimization



## Trust in the Armed Forces

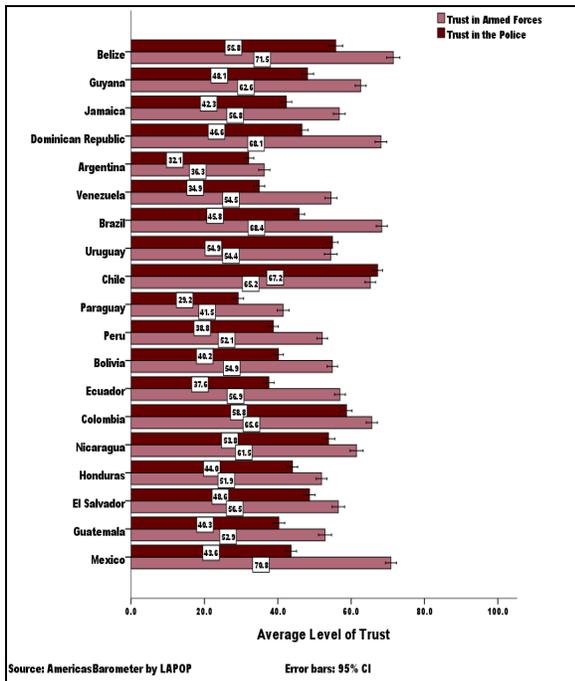
Levels of trust in the armed forces seems to be an important factor in determining support for military coups when there are high levels of crime. As noted earlier, using the military for crime prevention is an integral part of *“mano dura”* policies. It therefore seems worth taking a closer look at this variable. Figure 5 illustrates the difference in trust levels between the police and the armed forces. In all the countries, with the notable exceptions of Chile and Uruguay,<sup>9</sup> trust in the military is significantly higher than for the police. In the case of Mexico, for example, trust in the armed forces is 27 points higher.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Note that Belize, Chile and Colombia were not included in the regression analysis because in those countries the coup question was not asked. I have included them here to provide greater comparability.

<sup>10</sup> The recent focus on drug cartel violence in the North of Mexico has highlighted the apparently ineffectual, and

No doubt public opinion of this nature emboldens the military and may increase the likelihood governments will use them to supplement (or in some cases supplant) the police.

**Figures.**  
Trust in the Armed Forces and the Police



## Policy Implications

Given the growing problems of violence and criminal activity that plague Latin American societies, understanding how these concerns affect citizens' willingness to support authoritarian measures is an important element in promoting stable democratic governance. Increasingly the armed forces are being utilized to combat drug trafficking, gangs, and other criminal activities. Whether or not these actions ameliorate the problem of crime is debatable;

corrupt police forces in that country, and has led to an increase in use of the military (See, The Washington Post, accessed June 23, 2009. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/interactives/mexico-at-war/>).

what is clear is that in many countries citizens are supportive of using the armed forces to combat crime, and are willing to support authoritarian measures, in the hope of stemming the tide of violence.

In the last 25 years Latin America has witnessed a remarkable transformation, from military dictatorship and revolution, to institutional democracy, competitive party systems, and more open societies. However, while there is much to be hopeful about, the specter of the military still lingers. To the extent that elected civilian governments are unable to deal effectively with the myriad of social problems facing their countries--crime principally among them--the legitimacy of democracy vis-à-vis authoritarianism will diminish. On the one hand, the loss of legitimacy may lead to public clamoring for the "strong" leadership of the military. A deeper concern is that the militaries of some countries may take public discontent with their current governments' effectiveness in fighting crime as a green light to expand their reach into more areas of domestic politics.

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## Appendix

**Table 1.**

Questions Measuring the Circumstances under Which Respondents are willing to justify a Military Coup

Now, changing the subject. Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified under the following circumstances? <b>[Read the options after each question]:</b>					
JC1. When there is high unemployment.	(1) A military take-over would be justified	(2) A military take-over would not be justified	(88) DK	(98) DA	
JC4. When there are a lot of social protests.	(1) A military take-over would be justified	(2) A military take-over would not be justified	(88) DK	(98) DA	
JC10. <i>When there is a lot of crime.</i>	<i>(1) A military take-over would be justified</i>	<i>(2) A military take-over would not be justified</i>	(88) DK	(98) DA	
JC12. When there is high inflation, with excessive prices increases.	(1) A military take-over would be justified	(2) A military take-over would not be justified	(88) DK	(98) DA	
JC13. When there is a lot of corruption.	(1) A military take-over would be justified	(2) A military take-over would not be justified	(88) DK	(98) DA	

**Table 2.**  
Determinants of Support for Military Coups under High Levels of Crime

	(1)		(2)	
	Coefficients	(t)	Coefficients	(t)
Crime Victimization			0.064*	(3.87)
Perception of Insecurity			0.079*	(4.06)
Tolerance			-0.097*	(-4.60)
Interpersonal Trust			-0.073*	(-3.86)
Ideology			0.061*	(3.40)
Trust in Armed Forces			0.211*	(10.34)
Primary Education	0.003	(0.10)	-0.017	(-0.37)
Secondary Education	0.021	(0.53)	-0.013	(-0.26)
Higher Education	-0.092*	(-2.40)	-0.106*	(-2.19)
Wealth	-0.074*	(-3.42)	-0.090*	(-3.49)
Metropolitan area	0.022	(0.85)	-0.023	(-0.78)
Large City	0.107*	(3.94)	0.071*	(2.38)
Medium City	-0.000	(-0.02)	-0.039	(-1.61)
Small City	-0.009	(-0.35)	-0.019	(-0.67)
Female	0.069*	(5.26)	0.094*	(5.79)
Age	-0.184*	(-11.02)	-0.201*	(-10.32)
Mexico	-0.002	(-0.08)	-0.015	(-0.67)
Guatemala	-0.104*	(-5.92)	-0.116*	(-5.79)
El Salvador	-0.071*	(-4.69)	-0.084*	(-4.91)
Honduras	-0.018	(-0.84)	-0.016	(-0.67)
Nicaragua	-0.100*	(-5.22)	-0.124*	(-5.88)
Ecuador	-0.207*	(-8.63)	-0.226*	(-7.69)
Bolivia	-0.224*	(-9.60)	-0.239*	(-9.05)
Peru	-0.061*	(-3.33)	-0.079*	(-3.92)
Uruguay	-0.209*	(-10.46)	-0.220*	(-11.03)
Brazil	-0.143*	(-6.85)	-0.155*	(-6.96)
Venezuela	-0.214*	(-9.67)	-0.218*	(-8.67)
Dominican Republic	-0.177*	(-11.99)	-0.213*	(-11.84)
Constant	0.276*	(9.37)	0.348*	(10.26)
F	29.38		27.24	
Number of Obs.	23464		17609	
* p<0.05				