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Wither Honduras? Volatile Elite Politics and Citizen Dissatisfaction

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Executive Summary: This *Insight* report examines “triple dissatisfied” citizens in Honduras. Triple dissatisfied individuals are those who express low levels of support for regime democratic values, regime institutions, and regime economic performance. The report finds substantial increases in triple dissatisfaction since 2010. Over a third of Hondurans are triply dissatisfied in 2012, more than three times higher than in the last round of the *AmericasBarometer*. Honduras has the highest levels of triple dissatisfaction among the 26 nations surveyed by LAPOP in 2012. Citizens that express greater concern about gang activity in their neighborhood, express less confidence in the judicial system, are more supportive of former president Manuel Zelaya, and are less supportive of current President Porfirio Lobo exhibit the greatest levels of dissatisfaction.

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

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“Honduras 'no longer functioning' after plunging over fiscal cliff”¹. This headline appeared on January 25, 2013, and captures at least some of the deep sense of crisis facing this Central American country. This *Insights Series* report² revisits the political situation in Honduras by examining a measure of “triple dissatisfaction” developed by John Booth and Mitchell Seligson (2009)³. This approach provides insight into a moment of deep citizen discontent and volatile elite politics in contemporary Honduras.

Using the 2004 *AmericasBarometer* survey Booth and Seligson detected serious warning signs of political instability in Honduras five years before the 2009 crisis that toppled then President Manuel Zelaya. They found that citizen views of political legitimacy in Honduras were very low compared to its neighbors in Central America. The authors examined the proportion of citizens who were “triplely dissatisfied” as a percent of all voting aged citizens versus those who were “triplely satisfied.” The “triplely satisfied” were the citizens who scored above the scale midpoint (i.e. “satisfied”) on each of three key dimensions, namely 1) support for democracy,⁴ 2) support for national institutions,⁵ and 3)

¹See:

<http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/news/2013/01/25/16692051-honduras-no-longer-functioning-after-plunging-over-fiscal-cliff?lite>.

² Prior issues in the *Insights Series* can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>. The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>

³ Funding for the 2012 round 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), and Vanderbilt University.

⁴ This dimension is measured by a scale composed of three questions: How much do you approve or disapprove? E5. Of people participating in legal demonstrations; E8. Of people participating in an organization or group to try to solve community problems; and E11. Of people working for campaigns for a political party or candidate. The questions are measured originally on a 1-10 point scale.

⁵ Support for national institutions is measured by scale summarizing results of seven B-series questions (b2 b3 b4 b6 b21 b13 b31): B2. To what extent do you respect the political institutions of (country)? B3. To what extent do

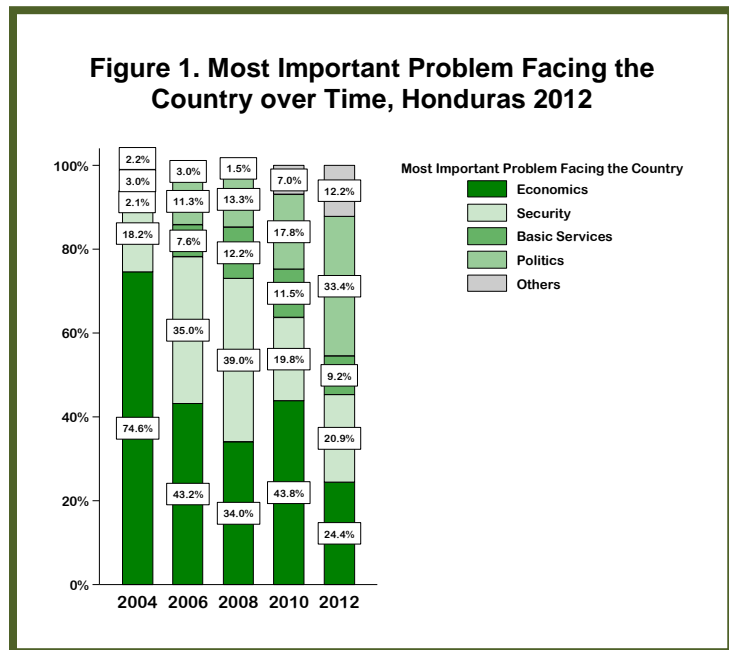
evaluation of the incumbent government’s economic performance.⁶ The “triplely dissatisfied” group consisted of those citizens who fell below the legitimacy scale midpoint on those same three key dimensions. Seligson and Booth revisited this issue in a prior *Insights “Special Report”* using the 2008 *AmericasBarometer* survey and found the situation even more extreme than it had been in 2004 (Seligson and Booth, 2009).

The results from the 2008 survey indicated extremely high levels of dissatisfaction among Honduran citizens, an indication of the sources of political discontent and polarization that served as a background to the military coup of June 28, 2009. After the coup, and using data from the immediate post-election period in early 2010, in yet another *Insight Series* report, using the 2010 *AmericasBarometer* survey, Orlando J. Pérez, John A. Booth and Mitchell A. Seligson (2010) reported substantial improvement, as measured by a sharp decline in the proportion of “triplely dissatisfied” citizens when compared to the pre-coup period. They concluded that “the removal of President Zelaya and subsequent election [of President Porfirio Lobo] seemed to have been cathartic for the Honduran population in terms of their levels of dissatisfaction with the legitimacy of their political system...”

you think that citizens’ basic rights are well protected by the political system of (country)? B4. To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of (country)? B6. To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of (country)? B13. To what extent do you trust the National Legislature? B21. To what extent do you trust the political parties? B31. To what extent do you trust the Supreme Court?

⁶ Perception of regime economic performance is measured by the following questions: SOCT1. How would you describe the country’s economic situation? Would you say that it is very good, good, neither good/nor bad, bad or very bad? SOCT2. Do you think that the country’s current economic situation is better than, the same as or worse than it was 12 months ago? IDIO1. How would you describe your overall economic situation? Would you say that it is very good, good, neither good/nor bad, bad or very bad? IDIO2. Do you think that your economic situation is better than, the same as, or worse than it was 12 months ago?

In this LAPOP *Insights* report, Pérez, Booth and Seligson again revisit Honduras's "triplely dissatisfied" citizens. It is troubling to find that in many ways, the political and economic situation in the country is now comparable or worse than prior to the coup. Some indicators of social stress are that crime has increased significantly. Over the past three years, there have been 20,573 homicides, with 7,172 murders in 2012 alone. The murder rate is 85.5 per 100,000 inhabitants, 10 times the world average. In comparison, murder rates in neighboring Nicaragua and Costa Rica are 12 and 11.5 per 100,000 inhabitants respectively.⁷ In addition to high levels of crime, the country is currently facing deep institutional and fiscal problems. President Lobo encouraged Congress to remove four Supreme Court justices following several decisions that went against his administration. Congress, the majority held by Lobo's National Party, did so without an impeachment process.⁸ Judicial controversies are not the only problems plaguing Honduras in 2013. The government finished 2012 with a budget deficit that exceeded \$1 billion (6% of GDP) and many public sector employees did not receive their December salaries or year-end bonuses.⁹ Polls



conducted over the past two years have consistently found high levels of dissatisfaction with democracy in Honduras. They have also found little or no confidence in almost every political institution in the country, with political parties among the least trusted (Pérez, et al. 2012).

The political and fiscal problems serve as the backdrop to the 2013 presidential elections. Since returning to Honduras former President Zelaya (formerly of the Liberal Party) and his supporters have formed a political party, *Partido Libertad y Refundación* (LIBRE). The party nominated Zelaya's wife, Xiomara Castro, as its presidential candidate. The rise of LIBRE as a viable political force has deepened the polarization of Honduran politics and fragmented the traditional bi-partisan system controlled by the National and Liberal parties. The National party nominated the President of Congress, Juan Orlando Hernandez, a close ally of President Lobo, and the Liberal candidate will be Mauricio Villeda, a vocal opponent of former President Zelaya. A poll conducted by CID-Gallup between January 14 and January

⁷ "Seguridad sigue siendo el dolor de cabeza del presidente Lobo," *Proceso Digital*, January 25, 2013 (<http://proceso.hn/2013/01/26/Nacionales/Seguridad.sigue.siendo/63414.html>); "Honduras, el más violento de Centroamérica," *El Heraldo.hn*, January 26, 2013 (<http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Pais/Honduras-el-mas-violento-de-Centroamerica>).

⁸ The Honduran Constitution did not contain a formal process for impeaching public officials. On January 22, 2013, however, the Congress approved a constitutional amendment to establish an impeachment process. The changes would require a three-fourths majority in congress to impeach public officials, including the President and Supreme Court justices. See: Mariano Castillo, "Years after crisis, Honduras considers impeachment," *CNN*, January 23, 2013, (<http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/23/world/americas/honduras-impeachment>).

⁹ Reynaldo Yanes, "Lobo dejará una economía desastrosa, según economistas," *La Prensa.hn*, January 22, 2013, (<http://www.laprensa.hn/Secciones-Principales/Honduras/Apertura/Lobo-dejara-una-economia-desastrosa-segun-economistas#.UQgDBonjki6>);

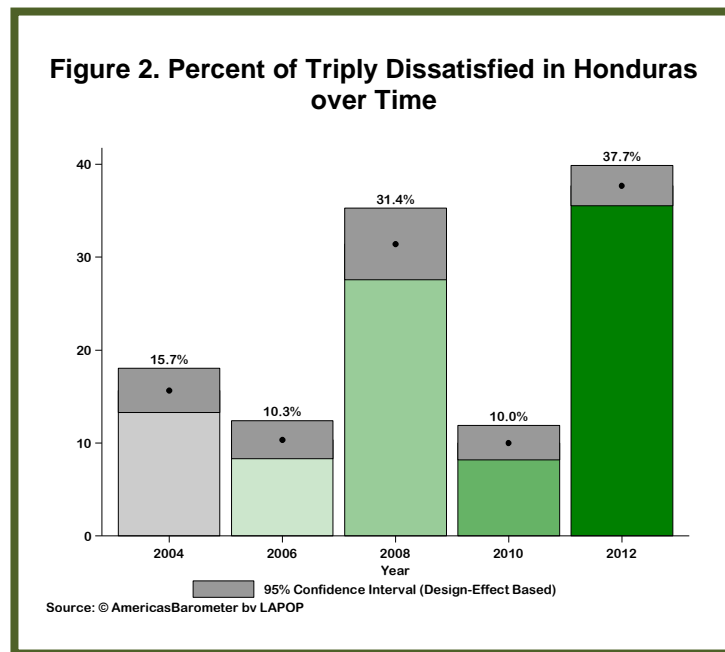
Alberto Arce, "Honduras can't pay its bills, neglects services," *The Associated Press*, January 24, 2013, (<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/honduras-cant-pay-its-bills-neglects-services>).

18, 2013 with 1256 likely voters, indicated that Xiomara Castro was in a statistical tie with Juan Orlando Hernandez, 25% to 23%. Mauricio Villeda was trailing with 16%, with another protest candidate, Salvador Nasralla, of the *Partido Anti-Corrupción*, obtaining 18% support. The remaining 16% either did not express a preference or refused to answer.¹⁰ The electoral ballot may get even more crowded as former head of the armed forces, retired General Romeo Vásquez Velásquez, who led the coup against Zelaya in 2009, enters the fray with his own party, *Alianza Patriótica Hondureña*. The political crisis engendered by the removal of the Supreme Court judges raises questions about the handling of the electoral contest. In addition, the *AmericasBarometer* 2012 national report for Honduras found a significant drop in levels of political tolerance (Pérez, et al. 2010). The low levels of tolerance, weak institutions, and political polarization create a volatile environment within which to hold democratic elections.

Politics the Main Problem Facing the Country

Figure 1 shows that in the 2012 *AmericasBarometer* a plurality of Hondurans (33.4%) chose “politics” as the most important problem facing the country. Since 2004 the mention of “politics” as the most important problem facing the country has increased 10 times, from 3% in 2004 to 33.4% in 2012. The mention of economic problems has fallen from 74.6% in 2004 to 24.4% in 2012. In the 2010 and 2012 surveys, the percentage of Hondurans who believe politics are the major problem facing the country nearly doubled. No other

¹⁰ “Honduras: Xiomara Castro se perfila para convertirse en presidenta,” *El Libertador*, January 30, 2013, (<http://www.ellibertador.hn/?q=article/honduras-xiomara-castro-se-perfila-para-convertirse-en-presidenta>).



country in the 26-nation *AmericasBarometer* had anywhere near this level of concern over political problems.

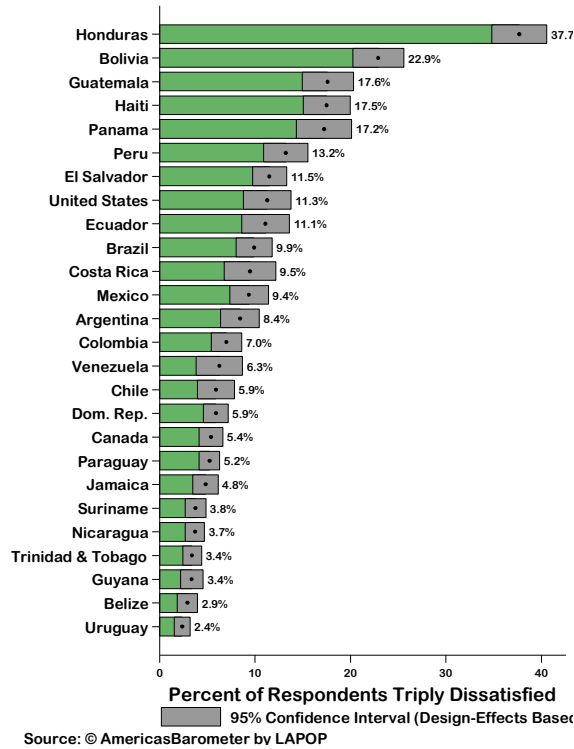
Triple Dissatisfaction over Time

If we examine the “triple dissatisfaction” measure we find significant increases between 2010 and 2012. Figure 2, indicates that the percentage of triply dissatisfied citizens shot up from 10% in 2010 to 37.7% in 2012. These troubling numbers are actually higher than they were in 2008 prior to the coup. In fact, the 2012 numbers are the highest of any country since the *AmericasBarometer* series of surveys began in 2004.

When compared to the rest of the *AmericasBarometer* countries we find that Hondurans exhibit the highest level of triple dissatisfaction. Figure 3 shows the levels of triple dissatisfaction among all countries surveyed in 2012. For some points of comparison, ten times more Hondurans are triply dissatisfied than are their neighbors in Nicaragua. Twice as many Hondurans are triply dissatisfied as Guatemalans and Panamanians. And there are roughly three and a half times more triply dissatisfied Hondurans

than Costa Ricans. Hondurans are twice more likely to be triply dissatisfied than Haitians, a country that went through what was perhaps the most devastating earthquake of the last 100 years!

Figure 3. Percent of Respondents Triply Dissatisfied



As mentioned earlier, the triple dissatisfaction measure is composed of three indicators: 1) support for democracy, 2) support for national institutions, and 3) evaluation of the incumbent government's economic performance. When we examine the evolution of each of these indicators in Honduras, we find substantial decrease in support for national institutions. Figure 4 shows a 20 point drop in support for institutions between 2010 and 2012; lower now than prior to the 2009 coup.

Figure 4. Support for Regime Institutions over Time in Honduras

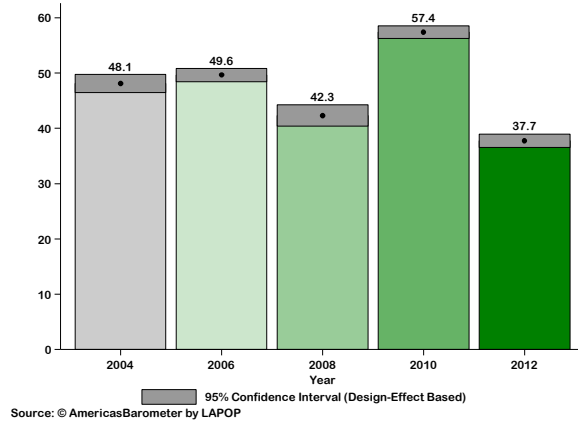


Figure 5 indicates a steady erosion of support for democratic principles since 2006. The figure shows an 8 point drop in support between 2010 and 2012.

Figure 5. Support for Regime Democratic Values over Time in Honduras

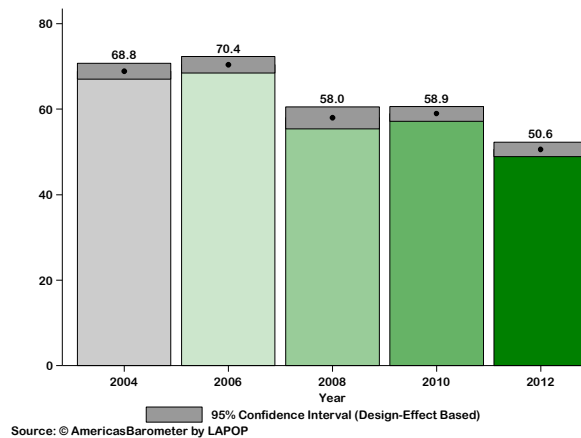
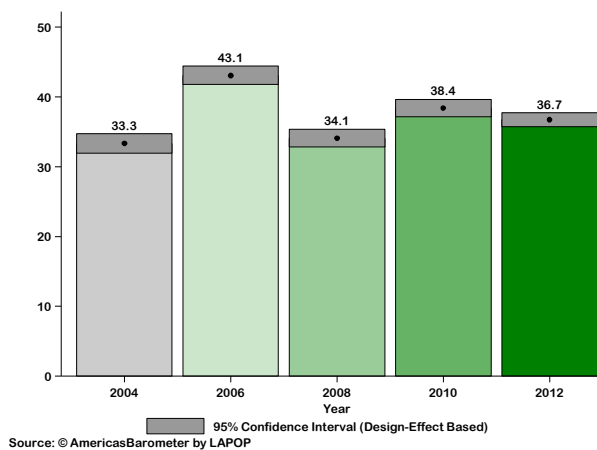


Figure 6. Support for Regime Economic Performance over Time in Honduras



The third component of the triply dissatisfied measure is evaluation of the economic performance of the government. This component, however, does not exhibit much change since 2008. In fact, there is a slight improvement. In sum, the large rise in the number of Hondurans who are disgruntled with these three important legitimacy components comes mostly from the rapid deterioration of their evaluations of political institutions and a substantial loss in commitment to basic democratic norms.

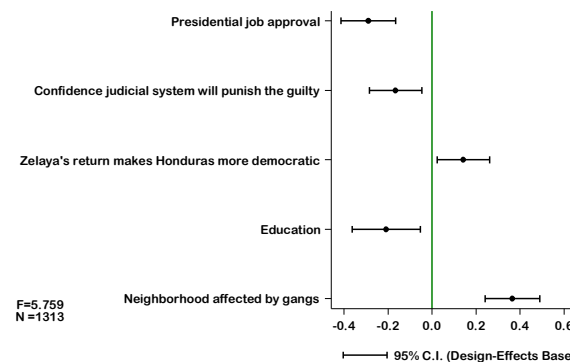
Using logistic regression analysis we find that perception of the neighborhood affected by gangs, confidence in the judicial system to punish criminals, education, presidential job approval and extent of belief that Zelaya's return to Honduras¹¹ improved the country's democracy are the most significant factors in explaining levels of triple dissatisfaction. Figure 7¹² displays the regression model with the significant variables.¹³

¹¹ President Zelaya returned to Honduras in May 2011 after a deal was struck with President Lobo. The accord also paved the way for Honduras' re-entry into the Organization of American States (OAS).

¹² 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

The results indicate that triple dissatisfaction is *highest* among individuals with *less* education, who perceive *more* gang activity in their neighborhood, are *less* confident in the judicial system, and express *greater* support for Zelaya and *less* support for President Lobo.

Figure 7. Predictors of Triple Dissatisfaction in Honduras 2012



Support for Military Coup

The high levels of triple dissatisfaction beg the question: Do Hondurans support a similar outcome as in 2009? The answer, as revealed in Figure 8, is *no*. Support for a military coup¹⁴ has declined substantially since 2008.

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.

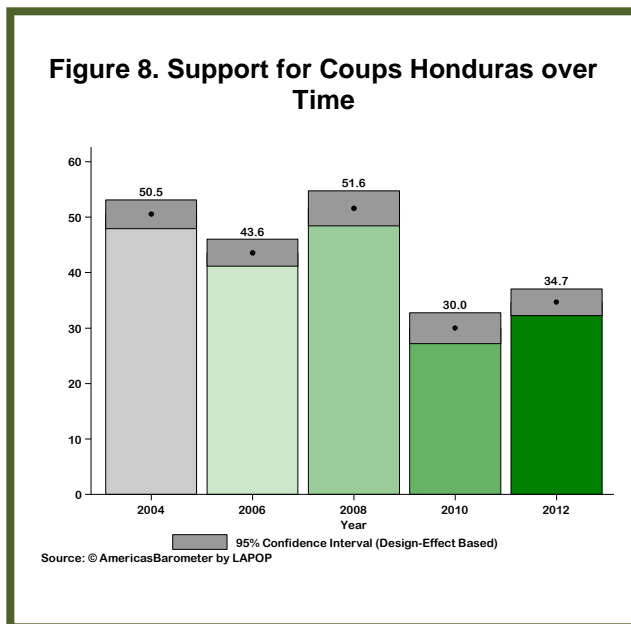
¹³ The analysis included demographic variables for age, wealth, gender, skin color and place of residence. Additionally, variables measuring crime and corruption victimization, perception of family economic condition and perception of insecurity were also included but not shown in the graph because they failed to reach the threshold for statistical significance.

¹⁴ Support for coups is measured by a scale composed of responses to three questions measuring extent of support for a military takeover of power under conditions of (1) high crime, (2) high inflation, and (3) high corruption. The scale is measured 0-100.

Support for coups declined by nearly 20 points between 2008 and 2010, and while there was a slight increase in 2012 the difference is not statistically significant. While public opinion does not induce a coup nor does it prevent it, it can create the environment within which institutions, in this case the military, see their range of possible actions. High levels of triple dissatisfaction can indicate to the military that they might suffer limited public resistance and

Conclusion

In 2013, Honduras faces many of the same problems it faced in 2009. Some problems, in fact, have worsened. By many measures, crime, political polarization, institutional weakness, impunity and corruption have gotten worse. The erosion in political and institutional stability is reflected in the significant increase of triply dissatisfied citizens. More than a third of Hondurans are triply dissatisfied. That is, more than a third of Hondurans simultaneously do not support democracy, do not support national institutions, and disapprove of the government's economic performance. The consequences for regime stability are troubling. A repeat of the events similar to those of June 2009 appears very unlikely to happen, especially given strong public opposition to coups, and potential for negative international reaction. However, the deterioration of institutional support is not a propitious environment in which to hold national presidential elections on November 10, 2013.



few consequences in terms of their legitimacy if they launch a coup. Conversely, where public opinion is opposed to a coup the military might come to believe that toppling the extant government might be too high a price to pay in terms of institutional legitimacy.

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Appendix

Table 1. Predictors of Being Triply Dissatisfied in Honduras, 2012

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Neighborhood affected by gangs	0.366*	(5.81)
Education	-0.208*	(-2.64)
Zelaya's return makes Honduras more democratic	0.143*	(2.35)
Confidence judicial system will punish guilty	-0.166*	(-2.74)
Presidential job approval	-0.290*	(-4.61)
Age	-0.104	(-1.34)
Female	-0.044	(-0.82)
Quintiles of Wealth	-0.058	(-0.81)
Skin color	0.026	(0.41)
Crime victimization	-0.106	(-1.62)
Perception of insecurity	0.052	(0.76)
Perception of family economic situation	0.022	(0.32)
Corruption victimization	-0.022	(-0.34)
Urban	0.031	(0.51)
Constant	-0.558*	(-10.74)
F	5.76	
<i>Number of Observations</i>	1,313	

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at *p<0.05, two-tailed.