

Insights Series #140

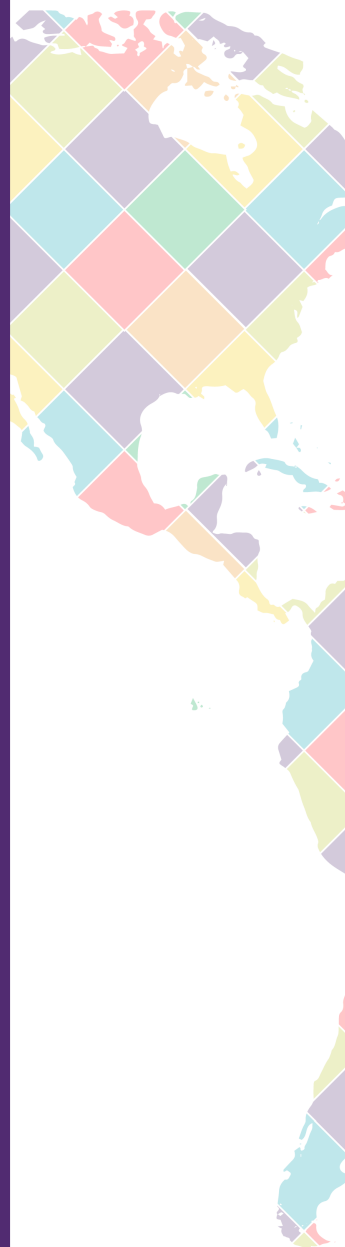
Support for Harsher Criminal Punishment is Greater among the Young, the Insecure, Victims, and Those with Low Trust in the Police

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Key Findings:

- Age is negatively correlated with support for punitive policies; among various other factors, it is the strongest predictor of less support for harsher criminal punishment.
- Women are marginally more supportive of harsher criminal punishment.
- Crime victimization increases support for punitive policies.
- Insecurity is positively correlated with support for harsher criminal punishment.
- Those with less trust in the police are less supportive of punitive policies.



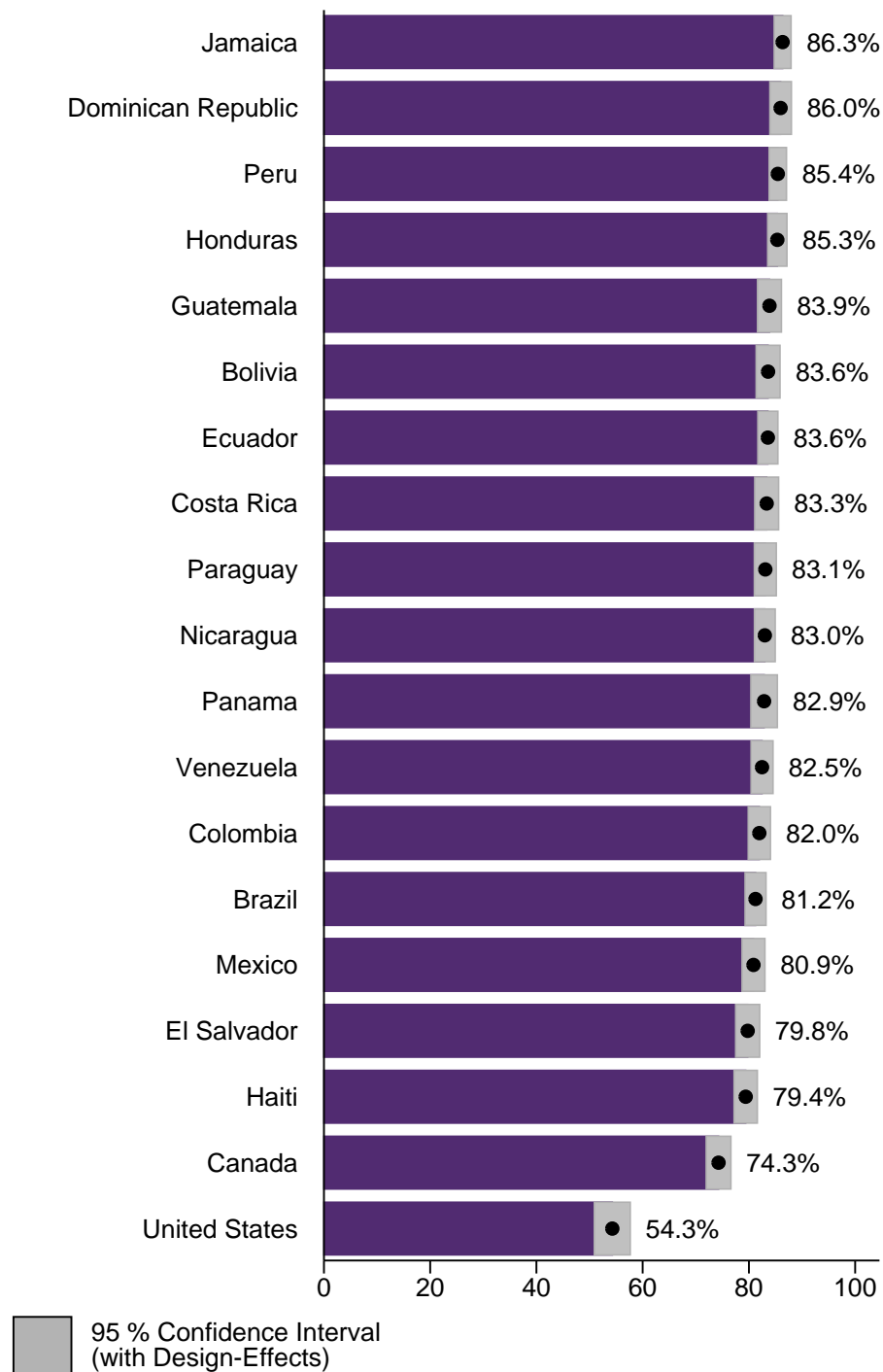
Despite governmental efforts to control crime in the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region, high victimization rates persist and many in the region express elevated levels of fear.^{1 2} Yet experts disagree on numerous issues related to crime, the criminal justice system, and effective approaches to the punishment of criminals. With respect to the latter, there is debate over which methods of punishment are most appropriate and effective. The region has seen increases in mass incarceration and various related reforms, yet people across the LAC region demand that more be done to combat crime.³ In this *Insights* report, we analyze public opinion in the Americas on the desire for harsher criminal punishment as a solution to crime. To conduct our analysis, we use data from the 2016/17 LAPOP AmericasBarometer survey,⁴ and we focus specifically on a question about punitive policies:

AOJ22NEW: To reduce crime in a country like ours, punishment of criminals must be increased. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Support for More Punitive Approaches to Crime across the Americas

Figure 1 shows the percentage of adults across the Americas who agree that, to reduce crime, punishment of criminals should be increased. In the figure, each country is represented by a bar that shows the percentage (as indicated by the x-axis) of respondents from that country who agree with increasing the punishment of criminals.⁵ The figure also includes a 95% confidence interval for each percent estimate, indicated by the gray area.

Jamaica has the highest percent of agreement with increasing punishment of criminal (86.3%), and the United States shows the lowest rate of agreement (54.3%). Interestingly, LAC countries show little variation: all fall in the range of 86.3% to 79.4%. In other words, across the LAC region, there is high agreement with increasing punishment of criminals. Agree-



Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016-17; GM v07172017

Figure 1: Support for More Punitive Approaches to Crime across the Americas

ment in Canada also is relatively high, at 74.3%. These results indicate a significant difference between the way individuals in the U.S. consider criminal justice and punishment/reform, on the one hand, and attitudes held by the public in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Canada, on the other hand. While that divide is notable, in the remainder of this report we concentrate on individual-level predictors of support for harsher criminal punishment within the LAC region.

Age is a Strong Predictor of Punitive Attitudes

In theory, a number of socioeconomic and demographic factors – in particular, gender, age, wealth, race/ethnicity, and education – could predict more punitive attitudes. To begin, research suggests that women in the U.S. may favor less punitive justice,⁶ yet there are at least two reasons to expect LAC women, on average, will report greater support for harsher criminal punishment. First, Miller, Rossi, and Simpson (1986) identify a group's subjective proximity to crime as a significant variable in predicting opinions on punishing convicted offenders; specifically, they argue that the more likely a group is to perceive itself the target of crime, the more likely that group is to favor harsher sentencing. Women have reason to fear crime in the LAC region: for example, Latin America contains seven of the ten countries with the highest female murder rates in the world.⁷ In fact, past research shows that LAC women are more likely to fear crime.⁸ Second, research has shown that women in the LAC region often hold more conservative social and political views than men.⁹

We also consider race and ethnicity as potential predictors of punitive attitudes. Research focused on the U.S. suggests that there is a “racial gap” when it comes to criminal punitiveness attitudes, with whites more likely than blacks to support harsher criminal punishment.¹⁰ Similar to the U.S., Latin American and Caribbean countries show patterns of discrimination and marginalization of black and indigenous citizens.¹¹ Following prior research, we posit that marginalized groups will prefer more liberal policies when it comes to preferences over punishment for crime. Thus,

we expect individuals who self-identify as black or indigenous will express lower support for punitive policies when compared to a group that has not experienced the same history of discrimination and marginalization (e.g., whites).

Additionally, some research suggests aging is associated with decreased punitive attitudes. Risk of crime victimization is found to be higher earlier in life and to decrease overtime.¹² A World Bank report of crime in the region found that youth constitute “the bulk of both victims and perpetrators of violence” in the region,¹³ suggesting that elderly may see themselves as somewhat removed from this problem that is largely concentrated in younger circles. As discussed, the more likely members of a group are to see themselves as potential victims, the more those persons may favor harsher sentencing.¹⁴ A reasonable speculation can be made about age decreasing the support for increased punishment as the elderly are less likely to be victims of crime and less likely to experience feelings of insecurity and therefore less likely to support increased punishment.

We consider higher education levels as possible predictors of more lenient views on punishment. Bobo and Licari (1989) argue that increased education levels generate increased tolerance both generally and toward the rights of nonconformist and disliked groups, which convicts can be classified as. This is limited, however, by the authors’ finding that this tolerance only exists so long as the group in question is “not extraordinarily threatening or extreme,” so the type of crime committed ought to matter significantly in determining tolerance.

Finally, we also consider wealth and urban/rural residence as potential predictors of support for punitive policies. Some scholars have found that wealthier individuals and people who live in larger cities are more likely to fear and/or be victims of crime.¹⁵ Assuming those more at risk will prefer harsher policy, we expect that wealthier individuals and people in cities will be more likely to support punitive policies.

Figure 2 shows the results from an OLS regression analysis, in which we

predict the dependent variable (support of harsher criminal punishment) with a set of six individual characteristics: gender, race/ethnicity, age, wealth, urban/ rural, and education. Each independent variable is coded on a scale of 0-1, with 1 indicating “more” of each variable. The dependent variable is coded on its original 1-7 scale, with 7 indicating strong support for harsher criminal punishment as a means to reduce crime. The independent variables are listed on the vertical axis and the predicted relationship with the dependent variable is on the x-axis. Points to the right of the red vertical line indicate positive coefficients and correlations. Each coefficient is plotted within a horizontal line that marks the 95% confidence interval for that estimate; an intersection of that bar line with the red vertical line indicates that the coefficient is not statistically significant.¹⁶

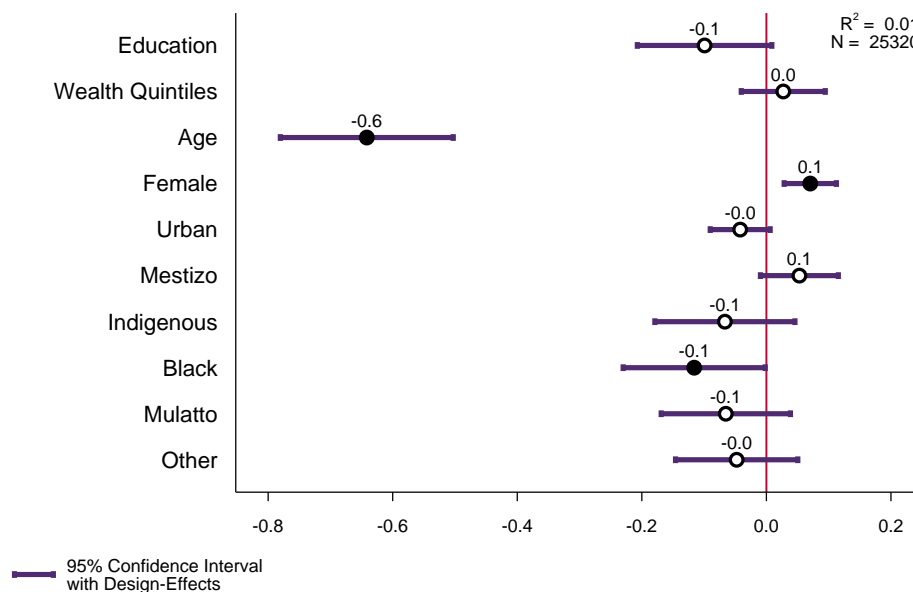


Figure 2: Sociodemographic and Economic Predictors of Punitive Attitudes

As expected, there is a positive relationship between being female and agreeing that punishment of criminals ought to be increased to reduce crime: women express attitudes that are 0.1 degrees (on the 1-7 scale)

more punitive. Additionally, compared to those who self-identify as white (the comparison category), people who self-identify as black¹⁷ have slightly less punitive attitudes: the model estimates attitudes that are 0.1 degrees less supportive of harsher criminal punishment. Interestingly, self-identifying as indigenous has no effect on punitive attitudes, which contrasts with our expectation that marginalized groups will be less likely to support punitive policies. The coefficients for other racial groups (mulatto, mestizo, other) are also not statistically significant predictors of attitudes on the harsher punishment for criminals. Age, as we posited, is a significant predictor of views on crime and criminal punishment with a negative coefficient of -0.6, meaning that older people are 0.6 degrees less supportive of harsher punishment as a solution to crime. Finally, Figure 2 shows that wealth, urban/rural, and education have no statistically significant relationship with attitudes on harsher criminal punishment, contrary to what we had speculated.

Crime, Insecurity, and Trust in the Police Predict Support for Harsher Criminal Punishment

To test a more comprehensive model of support for harsher criminal punishment, we expand the model to include measures of crime victimization, insecurity, and trust in the police. In this section, we report on our expectations for these measures, the results of an analysis that tests their relevance, and our suggestions for directions that future scholarship on this topic might take.

Crime victimization may be associated with support for harsher approaches to criminal justice. Riggs et al. (1992) find that crime victimization increases anger levels among victims, a feeling associated with both anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Horowitz (1986) argues that victims have to process trauma related information in order to reconcile it with pre-existing notions of safety and security, meaning that these personal experiences are integrated in victims' worldviews and attitudes toward crime in the aggregate. One outcome of victims' coping

process may be to express greater support for more punitive policies. In fact, Bateson (2012) finds that individuals who have been crime victims prefer harsher policing tactics and are more likely to participate in the political process, a behavior spurred by the desire to change the status quo. This research aligns with the argument that crime victimization increases feelings of anger and frustration, which mobilizes victims. Further, Johnson (2009) finds a significant and positive relationship between anger toward crime and support for harsher punitive policies.¹⁸ In short, we suspect that victims of crime, having experienced such trauma, will be more inclined to support harsher policies against perpetrators.

A number of scholars have examined the connection between individuals' attitudes toward punitive policies, on the one hand, and fear of victimization (insecurity) and insecure contexts, on the other hand. Studies on the rise in punitive policies in the U.S. in the 1990s show that fear of crime and aggressive political campaigns that increased mass panic about crime were significant factors that affected the public's support of harsher criminal punishment.¹⁹ Additionally, a study by d'Anjou et al. (1978) finds that there is a positive relation between punitiveness and fear of victimization. In short, people who feel threatened are more punitive and more aggressive, suggesting that regardless of actual crime rates, these perceptions will manifest in greater support for harsher criminal punishment. Ultimately, we expect higher insecurity and fear of victimization to predict greater support for punitive policies and harsher punishment.

Trust in the police may shape individuals' views on how punitive authorities should be vis-à-vis criminals. Scholarship suggests that general trust in police is shaped by individual experience and interaction with the police, with less trust of individual officers leading to distrust of the organizations with which they are associated.²⁰ We anticipate that people will view the police as the face of the criminal justice system. Assuming that lower trust in the police is correlated with lower trust in the overall criminal justice system, we expect individuals who do not trust the police will also be more distrustful of punitive measures. We expect that lower trust in the police could lead individuals to look to other institutions to solve the problem of crime, away from punitive policies which they may

associate with the police and their related institutions.

Given the expectations and literature presented above, we analyze the extent to which the following variables predict punitive attitudes: crime victimization,²¹ insecurity,²² and less trust in the police.²³ Using these new variables, we conduct another regression on support for harsher punishments. The results of our analysis, which also includes the measures previously shown in Figure 2, are presented in Figure 3.

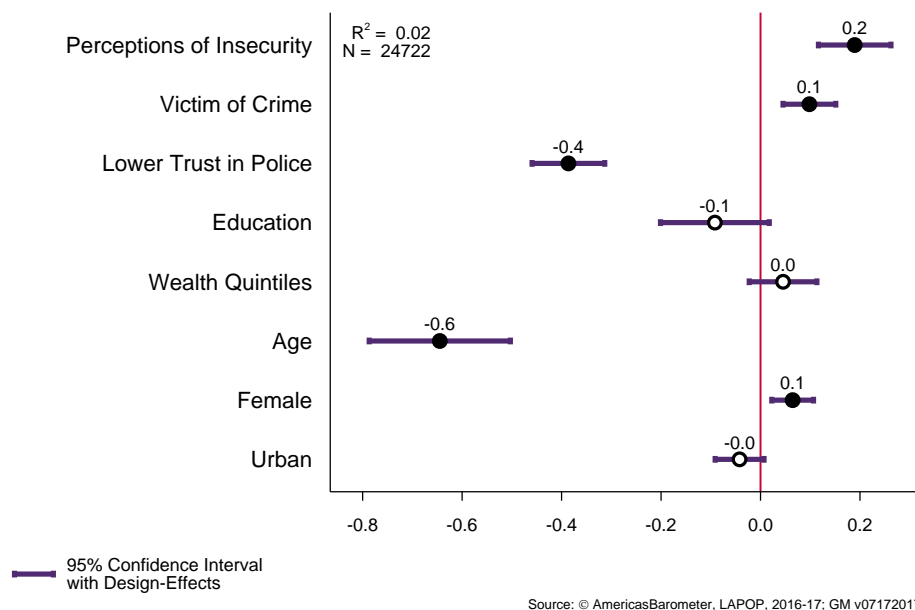


Figure 3: Sociodemographic, Economic, and Political Predictors of Punitive Attitudes

As shown in Figure 3, the results support our prediction that victims of crime support punitive policies. As Riggs et al. (1992) explain, crime victimization leads to trauma, anger and anxiety. These emotions and experiences appear to translate into individuals' policy preferences. Notably, the relationship found in our analysis between crime victimization and support for harsher criminal punishment, although positive, is not particularly large in substantive terms (the value of the coefficient is 0.1). Given the different types of crime our the variable encompasses,

further research into this relationship may be needed to gain a clearer understanding of the effects of victimization on people's preferences.

Our findings also support the expectation that greater insecurity will provoke an aggressive reaction: perceived threat of crime and insecurity is significantly and positively correlated with support for harsher criminal punishments. Specifically, the results show that individuals who are the most (vs. the least) insecure have a 0.2 degree increase in support of punitive policies. This result is in line with the research conducted by others, such as work by d'Anjou et al. (1978), which finds fear of victimization is a significant predictor of punitive attitudes.

Our expectation that less trust of the police will be associated with less support for harsher punishment is supported in the findings. The coefficient is negative with a value of -0.4. This supports our argument that lower trust in the police could lead individuals to distrust the criminal justice system and find it incompetent of solving the problem of crime through without harsher criminal sentences. That is, we believe that less trust in the police will decrease reliance on crime deterrence and stricter law enforcement as options; we interpret the finding of a negative correlation between trust in the police and preferences for harsher punishment as one manifestation of a broader underlying dynamic.

We note that, after adding these variables, age remains an important factor that predicts punitive attitudes. In fact, age has a stronger relationship with punitive attitudes than all other variables; even in this expanded model, age remains negatively and significantly correlated with support for harsher criminal punishment. More specifically, older people are predicted to be 0.6 degrees less supportive of harsher punishment as a solution to crime, compared to the youngest cohort.²⁴

That said, our initial explanation for this correlation loses support within this regression model. We posited that older people are less likely to be victimized by crime and, given the positive relationship we have identified between victimization and support for punitive policies, we expected this to factor into the older age cohorts having lower support for punitive

measures. Since crime victimization is added into the model in Figure 3 and the coefficient for age does not change significantly, our previous theory loses merit. Therefore, we postulate a secondary explanation. Punitive policies in the Latin American region have proven to be counterproductive to the goal of reducing crime, as mass incarceration has turned the overcrowded prisons into breeding grounds for organized crime.²⁵ It could be that older people, having longer firsthand experience with the effects of these failing policies, are less likely to support them. However, clearly, more work on developing and testing mechanisms that explain the strong association between age and lower support for more punitive policies is warranted.

With respect to other variables in the model, the variable of gender remains statistically significant, with females still predicted to be 0.1 degrees more supportive of punitive policies. Our first theory supporting this relationship was, as in the case with age, grounded in a connection to crime victimization and insecurity. Since we account for these variables in our model and the coefficient does not change, we reason that our second theory is better supported. We believe that women's support for more punitive policies is related to research by Aviel (1981) and Morgan (2015), which indicates that female public opinion in Latin America tends to be more conservative than male opinion. We also note, though, that women's support of punitive policies may go beyond the group's fear of victimization and stem from a complex retributive attitude due to the constant victimization they face as a group.²⁶

Education levels, wealth quintiles, and urban/rural measures continue to show no statistically significant relationship with attitudes on harsher criminal punishment. Wealth becomes statistically significant in this expanded model, but with a modest positive correlation (0.1) between increased wealth quintiles and support for harsher punishments. We initially suspected wealth would matter because of differential exposure to crime victimization, however this relationship is not statistically significant in our analyses.²⁷

We also believe that future research should focus more on how economic

and social factors can affect support for punitive policies. As previous literature has shown, individuals respond to threats to their social and economic positions with aggression. d'Anjou et al. (1978) suggests that, for example, social change that would increase the economic power of minorities, such that they constitute a greater threat to dominant groups, may inform attitudes like punitiveness. In the context of the 1990s, Platt (2001) explains that extreme cuts in government spending and unemployment were important in informing citizens' attitudes towards harsher punishments and a general insecurity about their well-being. This is an interesting view of public opinion over crime and deterrence policy, which finds it is determined indirectly by individual's state of well-being and economic prosperity, and involves important questions relating to the stability of people's policy positions.

Conclusion

Those who have recently been victimized by crime, feel more insecure, have greater trust in the police, and are female are all more likely to express more support for punitive policies in the criminal justice system, whereas age is highly associated with lower support for more punitive measures. Education, urban versus rural residency, wealth, and nearly all race/ethnicity categories (with the exception of self-identified black individuals) have no statistical significance with respect to support for or against harsher punitive measures in order to reduce crime.

Understanding public support for more punitive (vs. other) policies is significant from a policy perspective, as research indicates that the types of harsher measures that are supported by majority of the LAC public may have worsened the organized crime situation, in at least some parts of Latin America.²⁸ In other words, punitive preferences among the public, to the extent they are acted on by political representatives, could fuel a feedback loop in which punitive policies increase the strength of organized crime, which in turn only further entrenches hardline attitudes among the public and politicians. To avoid this dynamic, we suggest mea-

sures that might be taken could include community-oriented dialogues that include the elderly because of their more moderate views on these issues. Such efforts, along with efforts to increase security and education in the region, may decrease support for punitive policies toward crime and shift the focus to more proactive, rather than reactive, methods of managing crime and violence.

Appendix

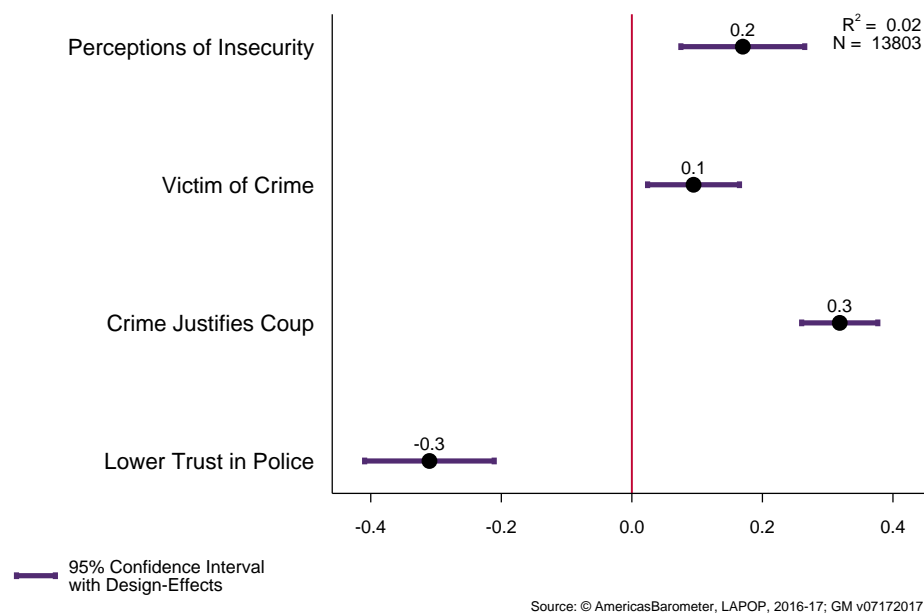


Figure 4: Political Predictors of Punitive Attitudes

Notes

1. Singer (2017).
2. Crime has become so widespread in the region that the Inter-American Development Bank estimates that the direct and indirect effects of crime in the Latin America and the Caribbean cost the region 3% of its annual GDP (Jaitman et al. 2017).

3. Ungar (2003).
4. 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>.
5. The answers to the question were recorded on a 1-7 scale; for this report, we have coded responses 5-7 as “agree” and 4 or less as “disagree.”
6. Applegate, Cullen, and Fisher (2002).
7. Yagoub (2016).
8. Singer (2017).
9. See Aviel (1981); Morgan (2015).
10. Secret and Johnson (1989).
11. Hooker (2005).
12. Macmillan (2001).
13. World Bank (2011), p. 22.
14. Miller, Rossi, and Simpson (1986).
15. E.g., Gaviria and Pages (2002).
16. Country fixed effects are included but not shown, for the analyses in both Figures 2 and 3.
17. The question used to collect data on respondent’s self-identified race was the following: **ETID**. Do you consider yourself white, mestizo, indigenous, black, mulatto, or of another race?

18. Miller, Rossi, and Simpson (1986) argue that those who perceive themselves to be in close proximity to crime or view themselves as potential victims may be more “likely to ask for harsher punishments” (317) of criminals, though empirically they find variation across sub-groups at the intersection of gender and race.
19. Platt (2001).
20. Worden and McLean (2017).
21. The crime victimization measure is coded “1” if individuals reported being victims of any type of crime in the last 12 months at the time of the survey and “0” otherwise (**VIC1EXT**. Now, changing the subject, have you been a victim of any type of crime in the past 12 months? That is, have you been a victim of robbery, burglary, assault, fraud, blackmail, extortion, violent threats or **any other type** of crime in the past 12 months?).
22. The insecurity variable is measured by the following question: **AOJ11**: Speaking of the neighborhood where you live and thinking of the possibility of being assaulted or robbed, do you feel very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe or very unsafe? The variable is recoded on a four-point scale that is coded here on a scale of 0-1, with “1” indicating higher insecurity.
23. Trust in police refers to trust in national police. **B18**. To what extent do you trust the National Police? Initially asked on a 1-7 scale, it is recoded here from 0 to 1 and such that higher values indicate *less* confidence.
24. Further analysis into the age variable shows that when broken up into quintiles based on age cohorts, the age groups 55-66 and 66+ have the strongest negative relationship with punitive attitudes.
25. E.g., Dudley and Bargent (2017).
26. Yagoub (2016).
27. We also examined belief that, under some conditions, military coup can be justified (on this topic, see Cassell, Booth, and Seligson (2018); the results are shown in Figure 4 in the Appendix. This relationship is statistically significant, with likeliness to express a support for a military coup could be justified positively correlated with support for harsher punishments. A possible explanation for this significance is the politicization of the military in Latin America. Kruijt (1996) indicates that Latin Americans view the

military both a political and stabilizing role. Given this historical function of the military, an individual who supports harsher punishments for the stabilization of crime would likely also support a justified military coup give its associated historical qualities. This relationship would be an interesting topic for further investigation. Interestingly, adding this variable into the model changes the coefficient on less trust in the police to a negative value, meaning a negative correlation between trust in the police and support for punitive policies. It also greatly reduces our sample since the question was only asked in half the countries. This needs to be addressed in future research on public opinion and punitive policies.


28. Dudley and Bargent (2017).

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As a charter member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Transparency Initiative, LAPOP is committed to routine disclosure of our data collection and reporting processes. More information about the AmericasBarometer sample designs can be found at vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys.

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