

In Central America, Support for Tough Crime Policy Tied to Corruption

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A new report finds that Latin Americans are more likely to support hardline anti-crime policies if there is a strong perception that their country struggles with corruption. This contradicts the assumption that support for the "iron fist" approach is mainly linked to concerns about insecurity.

[The briefing](#), released by Vanderbilt University's [Latin American Public Opinion Project](#), takes a look at survey data collected in 2010, examining the level of support for the "mano dura" (iron fist) anti-crime policies in 26 countries in the Americas, including the United States and Canada.



As expected, the survey found high levels of support for iron fist strategies in the Central American countries most affected by drug violence, including Honduras (40 percent support), Guatemala (39 percent), and El Salvador (39 percent). In these countries, the government's iron fist tactics focused on imprisoning large numbers of suspected gang members.

One general assumption is that countries with more serious security problems are more likely to support a tough anti-crime crackdown. But according to analysis of the survey data by Vanderbilt University, this correlation between crime levels and support for iron fist isn't necessarily the most significant. According to the university's findings, in countries where corruption was strongly perceived to be a serious issue, more people are likely to favor an iron fist approach. Corruption levels may in fact be the most important factor when it comes to determining support for hardline crime strategies, the briefing states.

The 2010 survey also found that Paraguay, Panama, and Costa Rica expressed the highest support for iron fist policies (44 percent support, 42 percent, and 41 percent, respectively). The new briefing describes these results as surprising, as Costa Rica has one of the most stable democracies in the region, and therefore suggest that a strong democracy doesn't necessarily lead to less support for tough anti-crime crackdowns.

InSight Crime Analysis

These findings suggest that the level of support for iron fist policies is not only dependent on how badly a country is struggling with insecurity, but on a government's overall capacity to govern well. As the briefing's conclusions point out, these findings could have some interesting implications for policy decisions. The findings suggest that support for iron fist policies could remain high even if crime levels start to decline, so long as there is no serious effort to tackle corruption rates.

Iron fist policies, when deployed in El Salvador and Guatemala, had little effect in reducing overall violence rates. Neither has this apparent lack of results significantly affected levels of support for the tough anti-crime tactics, according to the survey results.