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Public Insecurity in Central America and Mexico

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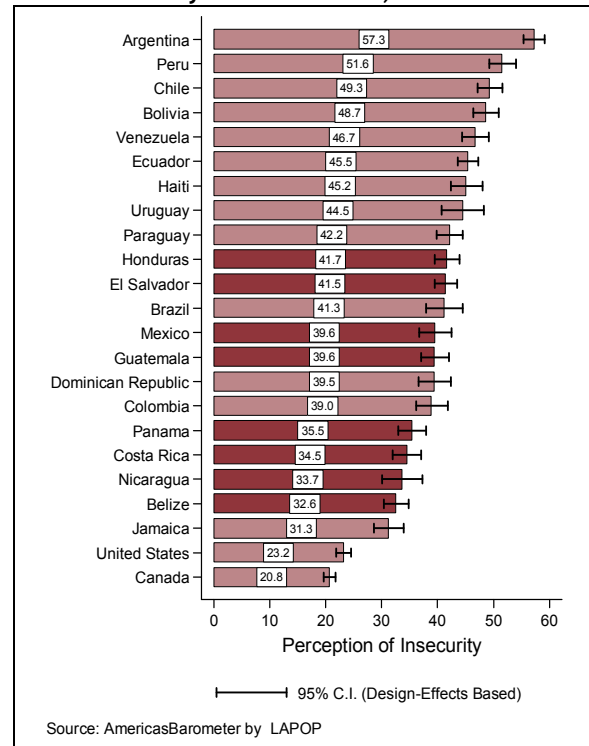
Criminal violence and insecurity have grown to become some of the main challenges for governance and democratization in Latin America. A recent report released by the UNDP places Central America as the most violent subregion in the world, higher than the Latin American region as a whole, which itself is the most criminally violent of all world regions. According to the data, Central America has a homicide rate of 30 deaths per one hundred thousand people (PNUD 2009). This is three times the overall rate for the world, and places Central America above the Latin American average. The impact of crime on development seems hard to overstate but as violence spreads out and becomes a frequent phenomenon in Latin American societies, public insecurity grows to be a normal feature in social interactions (Bailey and Dammert 2006).

Fear of crime can be generated by different variables, not only by crime and violence. Economic security, institutional performance, ecological conditions and individual

characteristics may affect levels of public insecurity. All these conditions interact with crime and violence to generate more uncertainty and, in some cases, social unrest.

This report in the *AmericasBarometer Insights* series seeks to explore the conditions that boost feelings of insecurity among the population in Central America and Mexico.¹ We have chosen to focus on these countries because they provide good grounds for comparison regarding different levels of violence. While El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have the highest crime rates in the hemisphere, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama report some of the lowest rates in the Americas. A further reason for focusing on this region is that the surveys carried out in these countries incorporated some questions that were not included in other countries in the 2008 series.

Figure 1.
Public Insecurity in the Americas, 2008.



* 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.

¹ Prior issues in the *Insight* 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 question used to measure insecurity is this: “**AOJ11.** Speaking of the place or neighborhood where you live, and thinking of the possibility of becoming victimized by an assault or a robbery, do you feel very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe or very unsafe?” Figure 1 presents the results for all the countries included in the 2008 round.

The survey containing the question about public insecurity due to crime was carried out in twenty-three American countries², and it was answered by 37,698 respondents.³

Figure 1 shows the level of insecurity expressed by respondents on a scale ranging from 0 to 100. As can be seen, there are important differences in the levels of insecurity and these levels do not seem to match the overall rates of violence reported across the Americas. Residents of Argentina, Peru, and Chile, for instance, express the greatest feelings of insecurity while Canada and the United States show the lowest. Although the countries that comprise the lowest tier of insecurity in the ranking are as expected, given that these countries (U.S. and Canada) have low levels of crime in comparison with many of their neighbors to the south, it is startling to note that two countries at the top of the list of insecurity (Argentina and Chile) have some of the lowest levels of violence in the Americas.⁴ Such results underline the fact that perceptions of insecurity do not always correspond to the actual rates of crime. This is a

² 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.

³ The non-response rate for this question was 0.9%.

⁴ There is some discussion about the actual levels of crime in Argentina, especially since recent measures (included the AmericasBarometer 2008) have reported an increase in crime victimization due to robberies and deadly assaults in the last five years. Nevertheless, the overall homicide rate in Argentina is only a fifth of the average rate of Latin America (PNUD 2009), a rate lower even than that of the United States.

well known phenomenon, labeled the “paradox of fear” in the criminology literature (see Covington and Taylor 1991).

In the case of Central America and Mexico, nonetheless, with the exception of Belize, perceptions of insecurity seem to follow the same patterns of the crime rates themselves. Hence, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, and Guatemala have higher levels of insecurity than Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua.

What conditions, in addition to crime and social violence, foster or impede the generation of public insecurity? This report will next explore some of the variables that explain perceptions of public insecurity in Central America.

Factors Associated with Public Insecurity

Fear of crime and feelings of insecurity have been extensively studied in social sciences. For some authors, public insecurity is a direct function of threats and vulnerabilities exposed by the risk of becoming a victim of crime (Lupton and Tulloch 1999). In this sense, past experiences of victimization, or being a person with socially constructed vulnerabilities (such as low economic status or living in a risky neighborhood) bolster feelings of insecurity. For other authors, fear of crime is a result not only of threats and vulnerabilities but also, and more important, of the representations people have about their social situation and their satisfaction with it. Mass media and processes of social communication, as well as perceptions of economic uncertainties, play an important role in boosting public insecurity (Elchardus, De Groof, and Smits 2008).

In this report, we concentrate on four different types of variables. First, we explore the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Following the literature, we hypothesize that women, older people, and people with low income will show higher levels of feelings of

insecurity because of their social vulnerabilities. Second, we explore the impact of victimization events. Here we consider not only crime victimization measured by the survey but also corruption victimization and, in our initial analyses, we added countries' homicide rates to a multivariate model. Third, we test the impact of perceptions of the economic situation as we expect that people with perceptions of poor economic performance will feel more insecure than the rest of the population. Finally, we test some ecological variables as well; specifically, we examine whether perceptions of risk in the community, gangs, drug trafficking, and police involved in crime boost public insecurity.

Since we incorporated a country level variable (homicide rates per country for 2006) in the initial tests, we first ran a multilevel regression with the whole sample of countries.⁵ However, the results did not return a significant coefficient for homicide rates nor were other country-level variables statistically significant, such as GDP per capita or human development index. Hence, we decided to perform single-level regressions for the rest of the analyses.⁶

The OLS regression performed for the countries of Central America and Mexico shows that size of city, wealth, age, and gender are all socio-demographic variables associated with feelings of insecurity (see Figure 2).⁷ People living in metropolitan areas, with low levels of wealth, women, and younger people tend to show more feelings of insecurity than the rest of the population. These results actually reinforce the argument of vulnerability: poor women living in big cities are one of the most vulnerable groups, and their high level of insecurity may be an expression of that vulnerability.

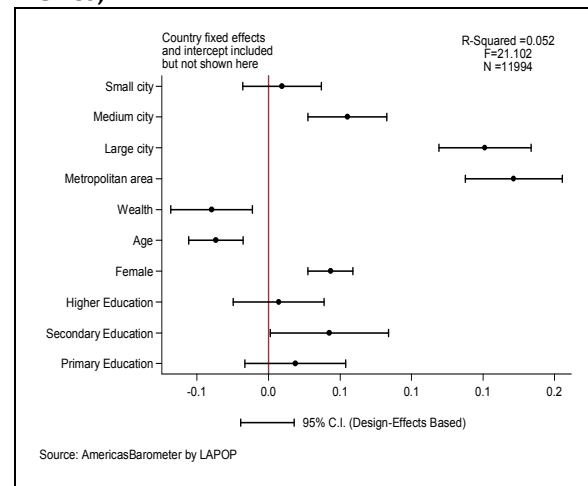
⁵ We could not run a multilevel analysis only with the countries in Central America and Mexico because of the low N (just eight cases).

⁶ All statistical analyses reported in this article were conducted using Stata v10, and they are adjusted to consider the effects of complex sample design.

⁷ Dummy variables for each country were included, using Belize as the baseline (or reference) category.

What is also interesting to note from these data is that although older people tend to be considered as more vulnerable because they are more prone to be marginalized, they actually express less fear of crime than the younger population. The explanation might rest on the fact that young people tend to be more directly victimized by crime than any other age-group. Fear of crime among youngsters is, hence, a reflection of their heightened perception of risk.

Figure 2.
Demographic and Socioeconomic Determinants of Feelings of Insecurity in Central America and Mexico, 2008

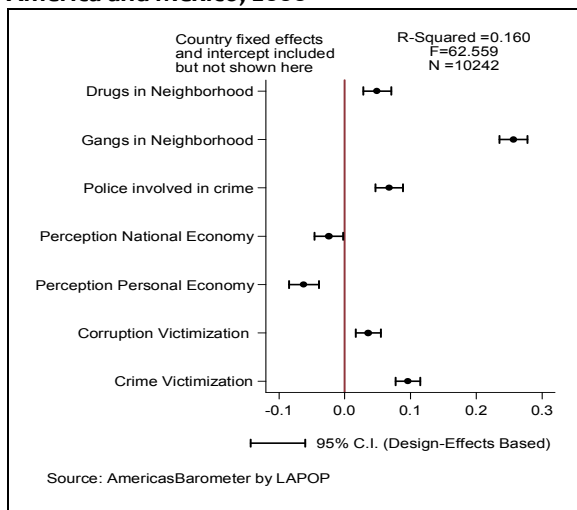


We also found that corruption and crime victimization (see Figure 3) increase perceptions of public insecurity. This reinforces the argument that actual crime plays an important role in public insecurity, but also highlights the importance of corruption of public officials as a generator of public insecurity.

Variables tapping media news consumption did not produce any significant result regarding the fear of crime, contradicting our expectations based on the literature (see for example: Gilliam and Iyengar 2000). That is, we had expected that greater media exposure would increase fear of crime, net of the other variables in our model, but it did not. On the other hand, negative perceptions of the economic situation, whether personal or national, turned out to play a part in

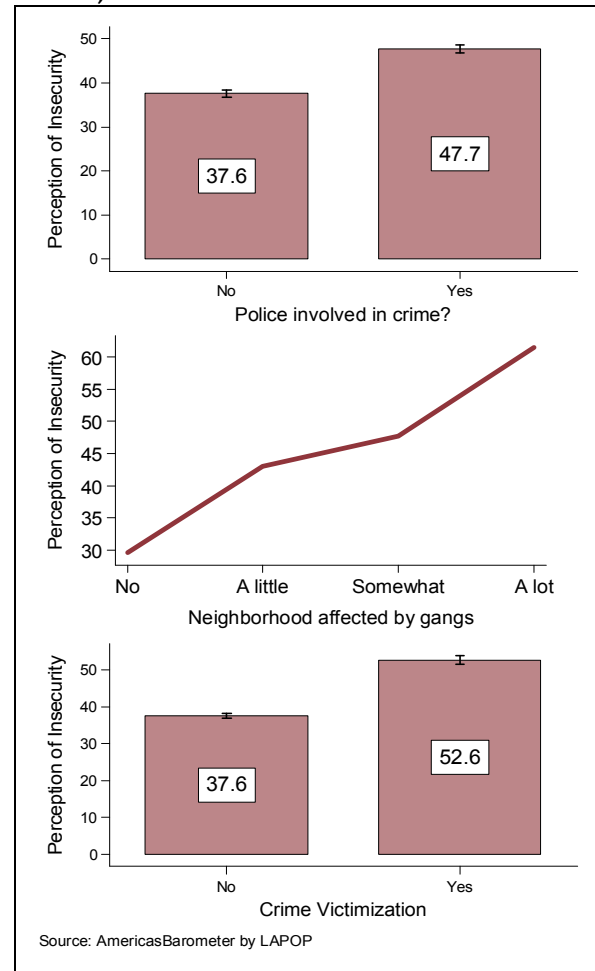
creating increased fear of crime in Central America and Mexico. In this sense, the results seem to support the argument that economic uncertainty contributes to overall public insecurity. In any case, this result might help to explain some of the differences between countries in terms of insecurity. For instance, it might help to explain why countries with lower rates of crime than the U.S. have higher levels of insecurity.

Figure 3.
Determinants of Feelings of Insecurity in Central America and Mexico, 2008



But perhaps the most important variables in this model in terms of policy implications are the ones that tap into the security conditions at the community of residence. According to the regression results, the perception that the local police are involved in crime and the presence of gangs and drug-trafficking in the neighborhood significantly increase feelings of insecurity among respondents in Central America and Mexico. This comes as no surprise in the light of recent events regarding the drug-cartel wars in Mexico and the expansion of *maras'* (i.e., gangs) activities in northern Central America. The presence of youth gangs, a problem that strongly affects Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras is particularly important as it seems to have a greater impact on the levels of insecurity than the rest of variables.

Figure 4.
Feelings of Insecurity according to perception about the police, gangs in the community, and crime victimization in Central America and Mexico, 2008



All of these results confirm what different studies have suggested in relation to the fear of crime (Ferraro 1995). Living in a community that is plagued by gangs, corrupt police, and drug trafficking generates high levels of insecurity, even if the community-dwellers have never been direct victims of crime. The presence of gangs, drugs, and a corrupted public security apparatus increases people's vulnerabilities and contributes to a climate of uncertainty that in the short run destroys the possibilities of building networks of reciprocal support, this is, social capital.

Policy and Program Implications

Among the many conclusions that can be drawn from these findings, we want to highlight three of them that have important policy implications for public security in Latin America, and Central America, in particular. First, economic certainties matter for the fear of crime and the consequences that the latter brings to social relationships in the region. In these days of economic downturn, greater components of the population are living at the edge of insecurity, not only as a result of an increase in crime and violence, but also because people feel more vulnerable about their own futures. As job opportunities dry up and remittances decline, it is important to develop programs that reduce the vulnerabilities created by unemployment and poverty.

Second, institutions also matter in the generation of security. The problem of public insecurity in Latin America is not only linked to murders, robberies, and assaults, but also to the performance of institutions bound to tackle those problems. Effectiveness is important here, but also transparency. Police officers linked to criminal organizations and corrupt public servants not only destroy public confidence in institutions, they also contribute to general insecurity in Central America and reduce the potential involvement of citizens against the control of crime. Any governmental policy designed to improve the effectiveness of law-enforcement institutions in the struggle against crime must include the development of mechanisms of internal control and institutional transparency.

Third, feelings of insecurity arise in communities infested by gangs and drugs. They put a substantial burden on community life and development, even in cases when their activities do not directly threaten the local population. Gangs and drugs are some of the main challenges to public security in Central America and Mexico. Hence, the implication is clear. The

gang/drug problem has been long understood in the region as the last decade has witnessed an increasing effort to tackle both problems. However, past policies have been relatively ineffective, partly due to electoral agendas motivating a greater focus on suppression as compared to other tactics. It is time to revise the doctrines behind these old policies. More specifically, along with revised suppression strategies, it is time to turn greater attention to community prevention and institutional strengthening.

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Appendices

Table 1
Determinants of Feelings of Insecurity in Central America and Mexico, 2008

	(1)		(2)	
	Coefficient.	t	Coefficient	t
Crime Victimization			0.096*	(9.99)
Percent of Population Victimized by Corruption			0.036*	(3.66)
Perception of Personal Economic Situation			-0.062*	(-5.31)
Perception of National Economic Situation			-0.024*	(-2.21)
Police involved in crime			0.067*	(6.34)
Neighborhood affected by gangs			0.257*	(23.52)
Have you seen anyone selling drugs?			0.049*	(4.56)
Primary Education	0.019	(1.04)	0.011	(0.59)
Secondary Education	0.043*	(2.03)	0.014	(0.63)
Higher Education	0.007	(0.44)	0.004	(0.22)
Female	0.043*	(5.42)	0.050*	(5.64)
Age	-0.037*	(-3.81)	-0.031*	(-3.11)
Wealth	-0.040*	(-2.73)	-0.035*	(-2.52)
Metropolitan area	0.171*	(9.93)	0.081*	(5.53)
Large city	0.151*	(9.24)	0.062*	(4.77)
Medium city	0.055*	(3.93)	0.024	(1.84)
Small city	0.009	(0.68)	-0.009	(-0.68)
Mexico	0.048*	(2.62)	0.024	(1.45)
Guatemala	0.057*	(2.99)	0.049*	(2.96)
El Salvador	0.067*	(4.01)	0.071*	(4.93)
Honduras	0.091*	(5.53)	0.066*	(4.52)
Nicaragua	-0.020	(-0.99)	-0.023	(-1.51)
Costa Rica	0.022	(1.22)	0.029	(1.74)
Panama	-0.011	(-0.58)	-0.003	(-0.18)
Constant	-0.003	(-0.25)	-0.013	(-1.10)
R-Squared	0.052		0.160	
Number of Obs.	11994		10242	
* p<0.05				