

Insights Series #164

## Who Trusts the Police?

Audrey Heffernan with LAPOP Lab  
Vanderbilt University

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### Key Findings:

- Levels of trust in the national police vary significantly across the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region
- Individuals who are older, less educated, and residents of rural areas are more trusting in the police; women also report higher levels of trust in the police
- Trust in the executive is a significant and substantial positive predictor of trust in the national police
- Positive economic assessments predict trust in the police, but only when trust in the executive is not included in the model
- Crime victims express lower trust in the national police



The national police shape citizens' perception of the justice system and government as a whole. Actions taken by the police, including the fair or unfair execution of the law, have consequences for the state's image. Prior literature has suggested a correlation between individuals' trust in the national police and faith in government.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, scholars have posited that, when the state operates under stress (i.e., where there is widespread political instability or criminal violence), trust in and respect for national police decreases, with citizens expressing greater support for more militarized forces instead.<sup>2</sup>

Distrust of institutions like the national police is correlated with lower respect for the rule of law.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, when citizens do not believe that the police will handle crimes fairly and effectively, they are less likely to report crimes.<sup>4</sup> To gain insight into how to protect citizens, democracy, and human rights alike, it is instructive to examine trust in national police across the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region.

This *Insights* report analyzes predictors of individuals' evaluations of their trust in the national police. The 2023 round of the LAPOP AmericasBarometer survey measured trust in national police forces by asking the following question:

**B18: To what extent do you trust the national police?**

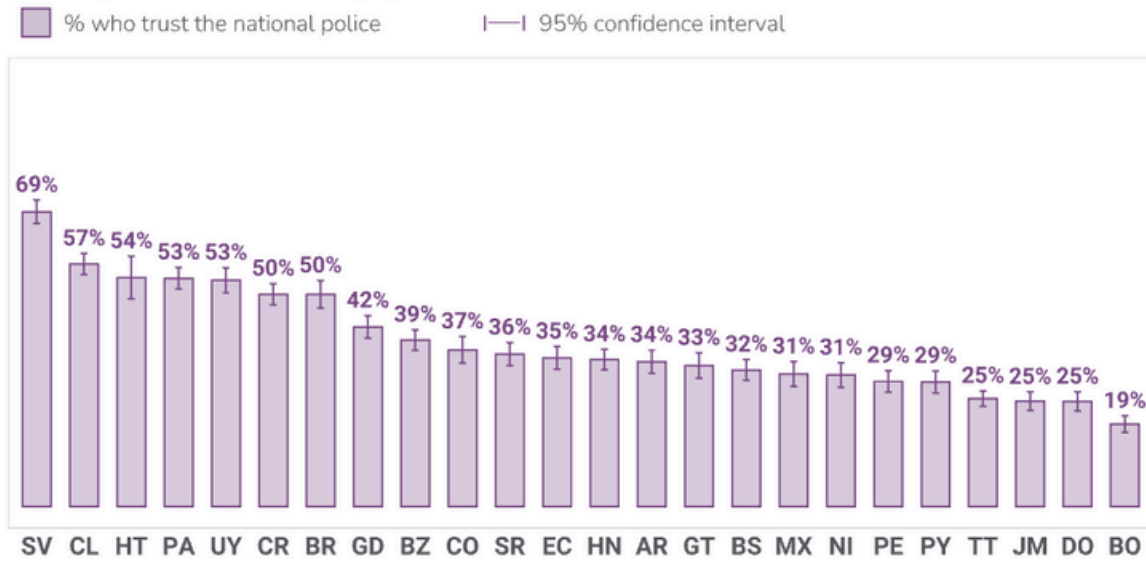
Respondents were instructed to answer along a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a lot).<sup>5</sup>

## Trust in Police Varies Significantly Across Countries

Figure 1 depicts the percentage of adults who trust the national police across the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region. The highest level of trust is found in El Salvador (69%). The lowest value is found in Bolivia, where just 19% of the public expresses trust in the national police.

Figure 1.

### Trust in police varies sharply across the LAC

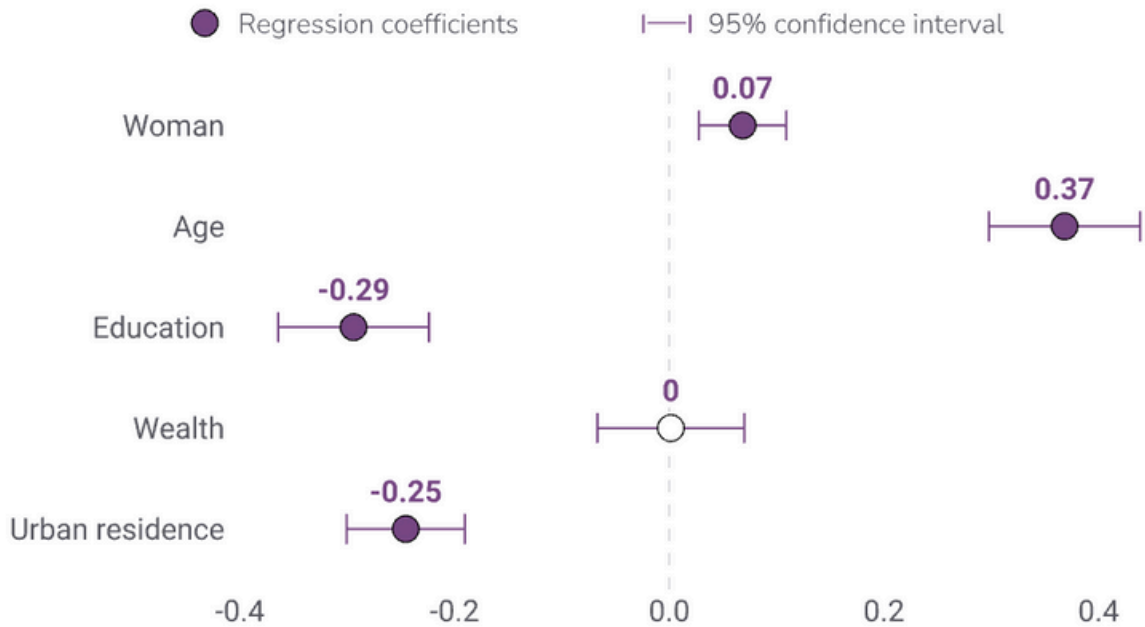


Source: LAPOP Lab, AmericasBarometer 2023



Figure 2.

### Trust in police is higher among women and older, less educated, and rural residents



Source: LAPOP Lab, AmericasBarometer 2023



## Gender, Age, Education, and Place of Residence Predict Trust in Police

To evaluate who places more or less trust in the national police in the LAC region, I start by using an OLS regression analysis to assess the variable's relationship with age, education, wealth, gender, and urban/rural location.<sup>6</sup> As depicted in Figure 2, there is a significant, positive correlation between age and trust in the national police, meaning that older citizens report more trust in the national police. This is consistent with analyses of AmericasBarometer data from 2014 and 2016, which found that younger individuals express lower levels of trust in police.<sup>7</sup>

The figure also depicts a significant negative correlation between trust in national police and urban (vs. rural) residence: Individuals living in areas that are zoned as rural report more trust in the police than do those living in urban zones.

Turning to gender differences, Figure 2 shows a significant, positive correlation between women and trust in the police. This finding is interesting, as prior literature has reported mixed results. Some scholars posit greater trust in police among women,<sup>8</sup> although the statistical significance of this relationship is mixed across studies.<sup>9</sup> Other research suggests a gender gap in perceptions of police *effectiveness*, with women often perceiving the police to be less effective than men.<sup>10</sup> More research is needed to understand when and how gender predicts views of the police.

Figure 2 also demonstrates a significant, negative correlation between education and trust in the national police, a result that is consistent with the results of prior research.<sup>11</sup> In brief, the greater an individual's educational attainment, the less trust in police they are likely to hold.

Finally, differences in trust in the national police across varying levels of wealth, measured using household belongings, are insignificant. This finding is consistent with other analyses of wealth in the region.<sup>12</sup> Yet it differs from some analyses finding that citizens in the LAC region who self-identify as members of higher socioeconomic class groupings express greater trust in the police.<sup>13</sup>

## Crime Victimization, Trust in the Executive, and Economic Evaluations are Tied to Trust in the Police

In this section, I consider several additional factors that could be related to trust in national police: crime victimization, trust in the president/prime minister, and perceptions of the national economy. Figure 3 presents the results of an OLS regression analysis that includes these additional variables.<sup>14</sup> The model also controls for the same sociodemographic and country variables included in the analysis for Figure 2.

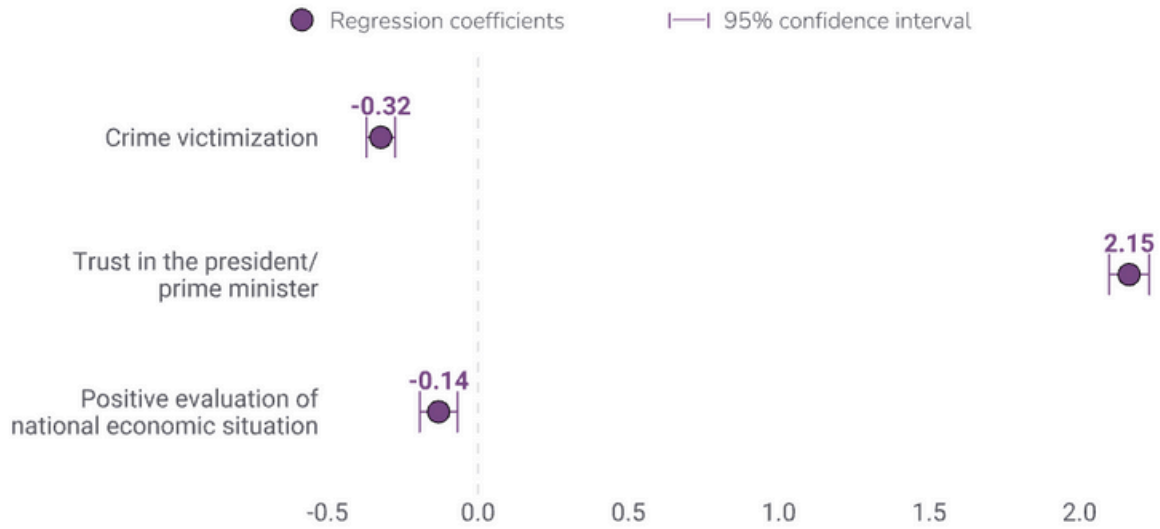
My first expectation is that experience with crime will correlate with lower trust in the national police. Prior literature indicates that crime victimization, defined in LAPOP's question as having experienced robbery, burglary, assault, fraud, blackmail, extortion, violent threats, or any other type of crime in the past 12 months, is associated with significantly lower levels of trust in police in the LAC region.<sup>15</sup> Consistent with these findings, my analysis shows that crime victimization predicts a decrease of 0.32 units (on the 1-7 scale) in an individual's trust in national police.

Additionally, I expect that trust in the executive (i.e., the president or prime minister) will be predict trust in national police. Previous research shows that trust in national institutions, including the executive, is associated with trust in national police.<sup>16</sup> Although most prior literature discusses this connection in regard to trust in more institutions than just the executive, my analysis concludes that trust in the executive, alone, predicts an increase of 2.2 units in one's trust in national police.

Finally, I expect that more positive perceptions of the country's economic situation will correlate with lower trust in the national police. Previous literature has indicated that economic development – specifically economic growth – can be correlated with lower average trust in police.<sup>17</sup> While that thesis pertains to shifts in a country's overall economic situation, here I look at whether an individual's perception of the country's trajectory is relevant to trust in the national police. Interestingly, I find that a positive (versus a negative) perception of a country's economic trajectory predicts a marginal decrease (-0.14 units) in one's trust in national police, when controlling for executive trust and crime victimization. Although not shown, the relationship is positive and significant when trust in the executive is removed from the model.

**Figure 3.**

**Crime victimization, trust in the executive, and economic evaluations predict trust in police**



Source: LAPOP Lab, AmericasBarometer 2023



## Conclusion

This *Insights* report shows that there are vast differences in attitudes toward police across the LAC region. Regression analysis shows that trust in the executive is the strongest predictor of a person's trust in the national police. Additionally, I find that better perceptions of the nation's economy predict greater trust in the national police, although this finding is not robust to controlling for trust in the executive. Furthermore, older, rurally-located, and less educated respondents are more likely to express trust in national police. Women also report greater trust in national police, on average.

It is important to note that positive perceptions of the national economy, which predict more trust in national police when analyzed without controlling for executive trust, may not be the result of economic prosperity alone. Increased corruption has been shown to lead to greater distrust in national police.<sup>18</sup> It is possible that respondents perceive that their nation is on a positive economic trajectory, but do not believe that all citizens are benefitting equally from this perceived success (i.e., corruption may increase alongside growth).<sup>19</sup> Additionally, it is imperative that policymakers keep in mind that crime victimization is negatively correlated with trust in national police. This has implications for whether those who are most often the victims of crime feel comfortable coming to police in times of need.

## Notes

1. Salazar-Tobar and Rengifo 2023.
2. Sung et al. 2022.
3. Salazar-Tobar and Rengifo 2023.
4. Boateng 2018.
5. This question was asked to 40,703 people in 2023. Of these respondents, 349 gave no answer or reported "don't know." As such, the item non-response rate is 0.86%. While the question was asked in the US and Canada, those countries are not analyzed in this report.
6. The dependent variable is scaled from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a lot). The horizontal lines running through the dots in Figure 2 represent the 95% confidence intervals for the coefficients (marked by dots). The coefficients capture the predicted change in trust in national police levels when an independent variable moves from its minimum to maximum value (to facilitate this interpretation, all independent variables are scaled 0 to 1). Figure 2 includes a vertical line that distinguishes between positive (to the right) and negative (to the left) associations. If the coefficients' confidence intervals overlap the vertical line, then there is no statistically significant correlation. Age is measured using the variable EDAD: the age ranges are 16-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 66+ years old. Level of education is measured with the variable EDRE, which is coded into three categories: none/primary, secondary, and university. While gender is measured by respondent self-identification (Q1TC\_R), too few individuals provide a response outside the binary to analyze them as a distinct category. These individuals are coded as "1" along with those who identify as women (vs. "0" for those who identify as men). Level of household wealth is measured by WEALTH, a five-category variable ranging from least wealthy (1) to most wealthy (5), based on household goods ownership. Urban is coded "1" if the respondent lives in an urban environment, and "0" if they reside in a rural area. These designations are based on census information; there are two exceptions: in Haiti and Nicaragua, where the 2023 AmericasBarometer was administered by phone, urban vs. rural residence is determined by self-reported residence in anything other than a rural area versus a rural area. Country-fixed effects are included, but not shown in the figure.
7. Malone and Dammert 2021; Salazar-Tobar and Rengifo 2023.
8. Malone and Dammert 2021.
9. Salazar-Tobar and Rengifo 2023.
10. Córdova and Kras 2019.
11. Malone and Dammert 2021; Salazar-Tobar and Rengifo 2023.
12. Malone and Dammert 2021.
13. Caicedo 2022. The differences between the findings reported here for wealth and those in Caicedo (2022) for class may be due to differences in the question wordings and/or the scope of countries including the analysis.



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14. To conduct this analysis, I used the following variables: B21A. To what extent do you trust the President/Prime Minister? The original 1 (Not at all) to 7 (A lot) scale was rescaled to run from 0 to 1. 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? I reverse coded and rescaled the three response options to run from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating more positive assessments. 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? The variable (VIC1EXT) is coded as a binary, which I have recoded so that "1" = Yes and "0" = No.
  15. Malone and Dammert 2021; Salazar-Tobar and Rengifo 2023.
  16. Salazar-Tobar and Rengifo 2023.
  17. Salazar-Tobar and Rengifo 2023.
  18. Malone and Dammert 2021.
  19. Caicedo 2022.

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**Audrey Heffernan** ([audrey.r.heffernan@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:audrey.r.heffernan@vanderbilt.edu)) graduated from Vanderbilt University in May 2024 with a B.A. in Political Science and Medicine, Health, & Society. A Fulbright grantee, Audrey is currently living and teaching in Spain as part of a program dedicated to educational and intercultural exchange. She looks forward to continuing her work at the intersections of health, community, and policy upon her return to the United States. She wrote this report as a part of the LAPOP Research Fellows Program.

This report was edited by Mollie Cohen, Elizabeth Zechmeister, and Luke Plutowski. This report was translated by Camilo Plata. Auditing, formatting, production, copy editing, graphics, and report distribution were handled by Luke Plutowski, Felipe Niño, Elizabeth Zechmeister, and Mollie Cohen. Our data and reports are available for free download on the project website. Please follow us on X to stay in touch.

As a charter member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Transparency Initiative, LAPOP Lab 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.php](http://vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys.php).

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[vanderbilt.edu/lapop](http://vanderbilt.edu/lapop) 

@LAPOP\_Lab 

[lapop@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:lapop@vanderbilt.edu) 

+1-615-322-4033 

230 Appleton Place, PMB 505, Suite 304, Nashville, TN 37203, USA 