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Bribery Diminishes Life Satisfaction in the Americas

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Executive Summary. There is little debate that corruption weakens support for democracy in the Americas. This *Insights* report evaluates whether corruption undermines citizen happiness with their lives. Corruption victims report lower levels of life satisfaction than do those who have not been targeted recently for a bribe. Being extorted for a bribe affects happiness in a way similar to being the victim of a crime more generally. Yet, there is no evidence that perceiving that the government is corrupt affects life satisfaction or that levels of life satisfaction are lower in countries where corruption is common.

T here is little debate that corruption serves as a drag on the economy (Blake and Morris 2009) and reduces support for democracy (Booth and Seligson 2009, Carlin et al. 2013). In this *Insights*[1] report I explore whether bad governance has a more personal effect. That is, does exposure to corruption make citizens of the Americas unhappy with their own lives?[2]

Several recent studies focusing on other regions of the world suggest there is a link between good governance and citizen happiness (Helliwell 2003, Tavits 2007, Helliwell and Huang 2008, Rodríguez-Pose and Maslauskaite 2012, Kim and Kim 2012). These studies have almost exclusively looked at aggregate trends: citizens living in countries where corruption is widespread tend to be less happy than are those who live in countries where corruption is less common. Yet these studies do not explore whether individual-level experiences with corruption affect citizen happiness. Thus it remains an open question if corruption hurts all members of society equally or if its effect is particularly concentrated on bribe victims.

Data for this report come from the 2012 round of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) surveys[3], in which 38,631 respondents

Figure 1. Life Satisfaction Levels by Country, 2012
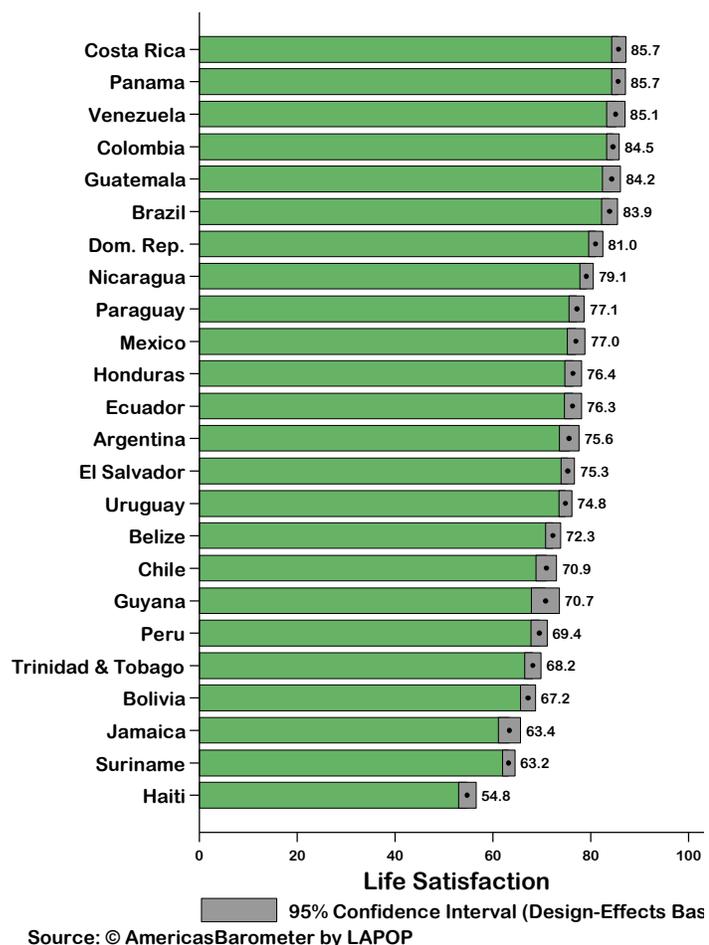
from 24 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean were asked the following question:[4]

LS3. In general how satisfied are you with your life? Would you say that you are...
(1) Very satisfied (2) Somewhat satisfied
(3) Somewhat dissatisfied (4) Very dissatisfied

Responses to this question were recoded so that high values represent high levels of life satisfaction and rescaled to run from 0-100.

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[1] 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
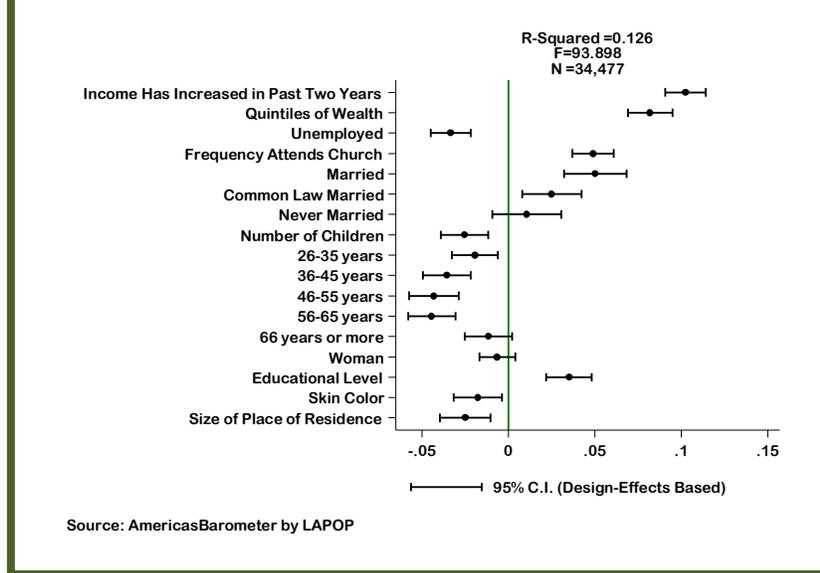
[2] The literature uses the terms "happiness", "life satisfaction", and "subjective well-being" interchangeably (Larsen et al 1985), a practice I follow here.

[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] The United States and Canada were also included in the survey but I exclude them from this analysis because data on household wealth are not available for the U.S. or Canada. These countries are in the bottom half of the hemisphere's happiness rankings.

Most respondents in the 2012 wave expressed high levels of life satisfaction: roughly 42 percent reported being very satisfied and another 45 percent were satisfied. Life satisfaction levels in 2012 were higher than those recorded in 2010 (Singer et al. 2013).[5,6]

Life satisfaction varies across countries. Figure 1 graphs the average level of happiness in each country in the hemisphere and its confidence interval. It is highest in Costa Rica, Panama, Venezuela, Colombia, Guatemala, and Brazil. The lowest levels are in Haiti followed by Suriname, and Jamaica. While satisfaction levels are lowest in Haiti, which is also the poorest country in the hemisphere, these country differences in 2012 do not seem to correspond neatly with national income. Chile, Uruguay, and Trinidad and Tobago, the three countries with the largest per capita GDP's in Latin America and the Caribbean, are all in the bottom half of the happiness rankings. This is consistent with previous work finding a weak correspondence between economic development and life satisfaction at the aggregate level (Easterlin 1995, Frey and Stutzer 2002). As countries develop, aspirations change and happiness levels may thus remain the same in the aggregate.

Figure 2. Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of Life Satisfaction

R-Squared =0.126
F=93.898
N =34,477

Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

95% C.I. (Design-Effects Based)

Demographic Characteristics and Happiness

Before looking at how governance outcomes predict happiness, I establish a baseline model of how life satisfaction levels vary across economic and social groups, following empirical specifications developed by Corral (2011). Several economic trends are clear in the literature. Wealthy individuals are more likely to be happy than are those who struggle to get by (Graham and Pettinato 2001, Diener and Biswas-Diener 2002, Frey and Stutzer 2002, Graham and Felton 2006). The unemployed are also likely to report being dissatisfied with their life generally while individuals whose income increases are more likely to be happy (Gallie and Russell 1998, Frey and Stutzer 2002, Lucas et al 2004, Kassenboehmer and Haisken-DeNew 2009). In short, economic security generally should lead to greater feelings of personal satisfaction.

Moving beyond pure economics, individuals who have a strong support network, such as those who are married or who participate actively in a church community, are also expected to be satisfied with their lives (Ellison 1991, Lane 2000, Radcliff 2001). Yet having children has been linked to lower levels of

happiness as parenting can create a financial burden and occasionally an emotional drain, although this relationship shifts over the life of the child (Margolis and Myrskylä 2011). Individual life satisfaction may also shift over the life cycle, with middle age individuals expressing less happiness than the very young who face fewer financial pressures or family commitments or older citizens who are well established (Oswald 1997, Frey and Stutzer 2002).

In Figure 2 I model individuals' life satisfaction as function of demographic variables.[7] I control for unmeasured differences across countries by including dummy variables for countries, but I do not report these in the figure. The figure presents the estimated coefficient from an OLS analysis.[8] The impact of each of those variables on life satisfaction is shown graphically by a

dot and the bars represent the 95% confidence intervals. The figure also plots the "0" line to judge easily the direction of the coefficient and its statistical significance ($p<0.05$). Coefficients are presented in standardized form (i.e., "beta weights") to facilitate comparison within the model.

Economic factors have large associations with life satisfaction. Wealthy individuals are more likely to report feeling happy than poor individuals are. Unemployment is associated with lower levels of happiness; in analyses not reported here I find that this is true at all levels of household wealth. Finally, individuals whose income has increased are more likely to report being satisfied with their life. Income, both in its overall level and its trend, is more strongly connected to life satisfaction levels than is any other demographic variable in the model.

Life satisfaction also differs systematically across demographic groups. Respondents' family situations also correspond to their happiness levels. Married individuals tend to have higher levels of life satisfaction. In contrast, individuals with children report less happiness than those without children. Church attendance is also associated with high levels of life satisfaction. Happiness is highest among the very old and very young. Women, individuals with dark skin, the uneducated, and individuals living in large cities tend to have lower levels of happiness (though the coefficient for the gender measure does not pass a strict significance test). In general, these life satisfaction patterns in the Americas tend to mirror those found in other regions.

Corruption and Life Satisfaction

Moving beyond demographics, recent scholarship suggests that life satisfaction is associated with good governance (Helliwell 2003, Tavits 2007, Helliwell and Huang 2008, Rodríguez-Pose and Maslauskaite 2012, Kim and Kim 2012). Some of these studies assume that the linkage between corruption and

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[7] The *income has increased* variable is drawn from a question asking "Over the past two years, has the income of your household decreased, stayed the same, or increased?" The *wealth* variable is based on an index of household access to water and electricity and ownership of television, vehicles, appliances, and other household goods-see Córdova (2009) for details. The *unemployed* variable refers to respondents who are actively looking for a job and contrasts them to those who are working, students, housewives, the retired and the disabled. The *frequency of church attendance* is measured using the question How often do you attend religious services? Never or almost never, once or twice a year, once a month, once per week, or more than once per week. Marriage is expected to increase happiness via its provision of companionship but not all relationships are equally secure, so I separately distinguish *married couples* and couples who are in a *common law relationship*. The baseline category is individuals who were previously in a long-term relationship but are now divorced or widowed, with *single individuals* as an intermediate category. *The number of children* variable is a count of the number of kids the respondent has; as a robustness check I have modeled it as a dichotomous measure of whether or not the respondent has any children and the substantive results do not change. The age cohort variables use the 16-25 cohort as a reference category. *Education* measured as the highest level of school that was completed: none, primary, secondary, or higher. *Skin color* is measured using a series of reference palettes enable the interviewer to rate the skin color of the interviewee on an 11 point scale, where 1 is the lightest skin tone and 11 the darkest (see Telles and Steele 2012). Finally, the *size of place of residence variable* distinguishes whether the respondent lives in a rural area, a small, medium, or large city, or the national capital, with high values representing larger cities.

[8] An alternative specification using ordered logit reaches comparable results.

happiness is through the economic costs associated with corruption at the macro-level and thus focus on aggregate indicators of corruption. Yet this pattern might also rest on several micro-level foundations.

One possibility is that corruption victims are similar to crime victims. Crime victims are less happy than are non-crime victims as a result of both the direct costs of the crime and the psychological costs of perceiving a lack of control over their own lives (Adams and Serpe 2000, Powdthavee 2005, Cohen 2008, Graham 2009, Graham and Camilo Chaparro 2012). Being targeted for a bribe likely results in similar material costs and loss of personal control and therefore could lead corruption victims to experience a drop in satisfaction similar to crime victims.

A second potential mechanism depends less upon personal experiences with corruption and focuses more on the normative costs of corruption. Corruption violates norms of fairness and reminds citizens that the cards are stacked against them if they stick to the rules while trying to get ahead (Tavits 2007, Helliwell and Huang 2008). This may diminish life satisfaction. Moreover, even if you yourself have not been targeted for corruption, the specter of corruption may have negative consequences. Previous work has documented a similar pattern with respect to crime; individuals who have not been crime victims themselves but who live in high crime areas also experience a drop in happiness as they live in fear of being attacked (Michalos and Zumbo 2000, Powdthavee 2005). Thus, corruption may have a negative effect on life satisfaction even among individuals who have not recently been targeted for a bribe.

Figure 3. Governance and Life Satisfaction Levels

R-Squared =0.139
F=87.043
N =31704

Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP
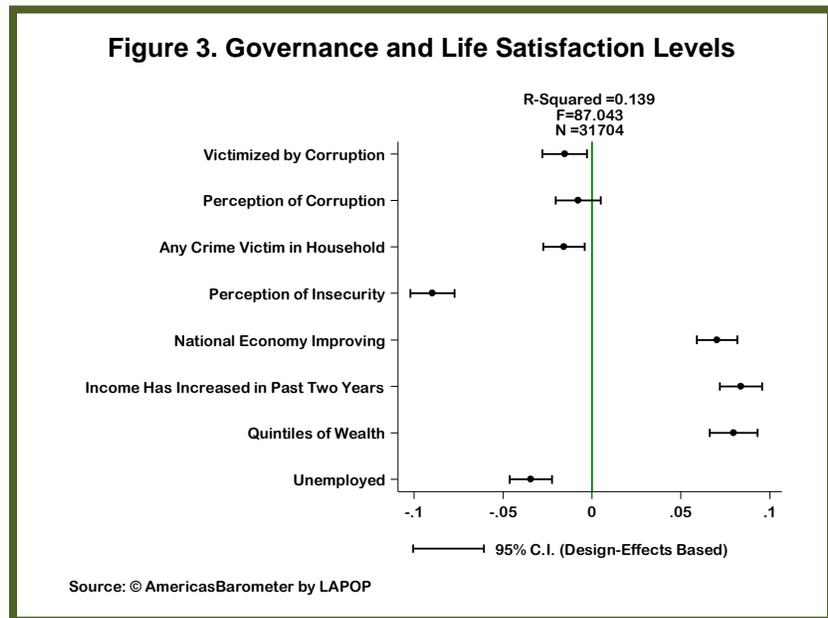
To test these expectations, I add measures of bad governance to the baseline model of life satisfaction I estimated previously in Figure 2. I assess the relevance of personal experiences with corruption by modeling whether the individual has been targeted for a bribe in the past year.[9] I also model perceived levels of corruption in the government.[10] To put these findings in perspective, I also control for personal experiences with crime and whether the respondent feels insecure in her neighborhood (even if she may or may not have actually been a crime victim).[11] Finally, as we move beyond personal experiences and their impact on life satisfaction to focus on the context surrounding citizens, I add an

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[9] The corruption victimization measure is a dichotomous measure with 1 indicating that a member of the household was targeted for a bribe by a policeman, government employee, court, local government official, or in the workplace, school, or health system and 0 for non-victims.

[10] The corruption question asks "Taking into account your own experience or what you have heard, corruption among public officials is very common, common, uncommon, or very uncommon?" Responses are coded so that high values represent a high degree of perceived corruption.

[11] The crime experience question is a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 if the respondent or any other member of her household was a crime victim in the last year and 0 otherwise. The crime perceptions question asks "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?".

additional control for the individual's assessment of the state of the national economy to compare how governance compares to economic performance as a driver of life satisfaction.[12] In order to make the results in Figure 3 easier to read, I omit from them most of the demographic controls and the country dummies; the full results are in the appendix.

The results in Figure 3 are consistent with the conclusion that corruption victims experience a drop in life satisfaction. Victims who paid a bribe are less satisfied with their lives than are those who did not. Victims of corruption have similar levels of unhappiness as do those from households where someone was a victim of a crime. Corruption and crime victims thus seem to experience a drop in happiness as a result of those experiences.[13]

There is less evidence, however, that life satisfaction levels are lower among those who perceive corruption within the government but have not necessarily been targeted for a bribe.

> *Victims of corruption have similar levels of unhappiness as do those from household where someone was a victim of a crime.*

While the estimated coefficient for corruption perceptions is negative as expected, it is not significantly different from 0.[14] As an additional consideration, I analyzed whether levels of happiness at the country-level are correlated with levels of corruption reported in the World Bank's Governance Indicators or by Transparency International, and I find no significant correlations. In contrast to much of the previous work on other regions, I find little

evidence that high levels of perceived corruption have a significant effect on how citizens of the Americas perceive their own lives. In other words, in the Americas, the evidence from the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey is that the negative effect of corruption on life satisfaction is driven by personal experiences, such that this relationship is limited to bribe extortion victims.

Another key finding from Figure 3 is that corruption's effect on life satisfaction is smaller than is the effect of economics or a general sense of insecurity. The effects of wealth and changes in income are substantially larger than is the effect of being targeted for a bribe. While the effects of crime victimization and corruption victimization are roughly equal in magnitude, both are dwarfed by the effect of living in an area that is unsafe. Fear of violence is associated with large levels of discontent even among non-crime victims; the predicted impact of this factor is roughly equal to any of the economic variables in the model. So while corruption appears to diminish life satisfaction in the Americas, the results here suggest that this relationship is less consequential than is that between life satisfaction and measures related to economic performance and security, two issues consistently rated as more important problems than corruption in the AmericasBarometer surveys (Singer et al 2013).

Conclusion

The results presented here support the notion that government performance can have an important effect on personal happiness. Consistent with the importance of other individual-level economic factors, a strong national economy is linked to higher levels of life satisfaction. Yet non-economic factors can

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[12] Respondents were asked "Do you think that the country's current economic situation is better than, the same as or worse than it was 12 months ago?" with high values representing an improving economy.

[13] It is also possible that those who are unhappy are more likely to report themselves to be victims of these negative experiences; in an analysis of the type presented here, such reciprocal causation cannot be tested for, or ruled out.

[14] The effect of general corruption perceptions is insignificant even if we drop the corruption victimization measure from the models.

also leave important imprints on citizens' lives. Crime victimization and living surrounded by crime create real costs to individuals, and therefore result in drops in happiness.

Yet this study also suggests that the costs of government corruption include an effect on citizens' life satisfaction. Being targeted to pay a bribe reduces life satisfaction even if overall levels of perceived corruption do not. The close correspondence of crime victimization and corruption victimization is instructive-they both entail monetary costs and the psychological costs of confronting the lack of control victims have over their lives. These findings suggest that, if steps are taken to keep citizens safe from criminals or from officials abusing their positions to extract bribes, happiness should improve among those individuals who are most frequently targeted.

While overall levels of perceived corruption do not have a strong negative effect on citizen satisfaction with their own lives, we should not conclude that citizens are resigned to corruption or ignore it. *AmericasBarometer* data not presented here (but see Carlin et al. 2013) show that citizens who perceive that the government is corrupt tend to be less supportive of democratic institutions, less likely to be satisfied with the overall state of democracy in their country, and more likely to tolerate political activities by those looking to enact regime change. Citizens in the Americas thus recognize the negative political consequences of political corruption for democracy and the economy and may be willing to take political steps to reduce it even if there is less evidence of a direct connection between how citizens of the Americas perceive levels of government corruption and how they perceive their own welfare.

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Appendix

Table 1. Predictors of Life Satisfaction in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2012

	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Victimized by Corruption			-0.015*	(0.006)
Perception of Corruption in Government			-0.008	(0.006)
Crime Victim in Household			-0.016*	(0.006)
Perception of Insecurity			-0.090*	(0.006)
National Economy has Improved			0.070*	(0.006)
Income has Increased in Past Two Years	0.102*	(0.006)	0.084*	(0.006)
Quintiles of Wealth	0.082*	(0.007)	0.080*	(0.007)
Unemployed	-0.033*	(0.006)	-0.034*	(0.006)
Frequency Attends Church	0.049*	(0.006)	0.045*	(0.006)
Married	0.050*	(0.009)	0.052*	(0.010)
Common-Law Married	0.025*	(0.009)	0.028*	(0.009)
Never Married	0.011	(0.010)	0.009	(0.011)
Number of Children	-0.025*	(0.007)	-0.026*	(0.007)
26-35	-0.019*	(0.007)	-0.019*	(0.007)
36-45	-0.036*	(0.007)	-0.032*	(0.007)
46-55	-0.043*	(0.007)	-0.040*	(0.007)
56-65	-0.044*	(0.007)	-0.043*	(0.007)
66+	-0.011	(0.007)	-0.009	(0.007)
Woman	-0.006	(0.005)	-0.005	(0.005)
Educational Level	0.035*	(0.007)	0.037*	(0.007)
Skin Color	-0.018*	(0.007)	-0.009	(0.007)
Size of Place of Residence	-0.025*	(0.007)	-0.004	(0.008)
Argentina	-0.021*	(0.011)	-0.025*	(0.011)
Belize	-0.030*	(0.009)	-0.038*	(0.010)
Bolivia	-0.114*	(0.013)	-0.113*	(0.014)
Brazil	0.040*	(0.010)	0.029*	(0.010)
Chile	-0.044*	(0.011)	-0.054*	(0.011)
Colombia	0.051*	(0.009)	0.043*	(0.009)
Costa Rica	0.058*	(0.009)	0.054*	(0.009)
Dominican Rep.	0.034*	(0.009)	0.033*	(0.009)
Ecuador	-0.013	(0.010)	-0.016	(0.010)
El Salvador	-0.014	(0.009)	-0.013	(0.009)
Guatemala	0.048*	(0.010)	0.048*	(0.009)
Guyana	-0.058*	(0.013)	-0.067*	(0.013)
Haiti	-0.151*	(0.011)	-0.152*	(0.011)
Honduras	0.002	(0.011)	0.005	(0.011)
Jamaica	-0.103*	(0.011)	-0.120*	(0.011)
Nicaragua	0.017	(0.009)	0.001	(0.010)
Panama	0.070*	(0.009)	0.053*	(0.009)
Paraguay	-0.011	(0.010)	-0.022*	(0.010)
Peru	-0.063*	(0.010)	-0.065*	(0.010)
Suriname	-0.106*	(0.009)	-0.120*	(0.010)
Trinidad & Tobago	-0.077*	(0.010)	-0.088*	(0.010)
Uruguay	-0.021*	(0.009)	-0.037*	(0.009)
Venezuela	0.056*	(0.010)	0.054*	(0.010)
Constant	-0.004	(0.007)	-0.002	(0.007)
R-squared	0.128		0.139	
Number of Observations	34,477		31,704	

* Denotes coefficients that are statistically significant at *p<0.05, two-tailed.
Country of Reference: Mexico