



A citizen's guide to U.S. security and defense assistance

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New Study Indicates Growing Support for Vigilante Justice in Latin America

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04/03/15 Gabrielle Acierno

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Across Latin America and the Caribbean, the number of people supporting the use of vigilantism, an indicator of distrust in law enforcement and judicial institutions, is significantly increasing according to a recent study by Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project. Although the study, which is based on surveys from 2004 and 2014, shows most people throughout the Americas do not support vigilantism, the findings highlight challenges in U.S. security assistance to many countries in Latin American and the Caribbean.

Citizen self-defense or vigilante groups have sprung up throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, taking arms to fight organized crime where many believe governments and institutions have failed. The results have typically bred more instability.

A recent InSight Crime article indicates Latin America's history boasts ample examples of how vigilantism often leads to more violence, from Colombia's paramilitary groups, to Venezuela's urban militias, to Mexico's 'autodefensa' phenomena, to police militias in Brazil and police death squads in El Salvador and Honduras. In turbulent states like Michoacán, Mexico, organized citizen defense groups ("autodefensas") rose up in 2013, frustrated with the government's ineptitude at reigning in violence and cartel influence. Yet, the state is now dealing with its highest crime and intentional homicide rates in years.



Despite examples of vigilantism stoking more problems than it solves, the Vanderbilt University study shows there was a significant increase in the number of people from Latin America and the Caribbean that do support citizens taking the law into their own hands from 2012 to 2014. In fact, the number of people supporting vigilantism in 2014 was greater than any other year for which surveys were taken from 2004 to 2012.

The twelve countries with the highest average support for vigilante justice (excluding the United States) are the following:

Table 1: Top Average Scores for Latin America and Caribbean Countries (excluding USA)			
Countries	Score	Countries	Score
Dominican Republic	42.8	Bolivia	37.2
Paraguay	42.3	Jamaica	36.3
Peru	40.6	Haiti	35.0
Honduras	39.6	Nicaragua	33.8
El Salvador	38.2	Mexico	33.1
Ecuador	37.7	Belize	31.7

While indigenous culture in countries like Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador could be driving the high rates of approval in these countries, the increasing levels of support for vigilantism stem from the dire state of institutional legitimacy throughout Latin America and the strong need to restore citizen's faith and trust in law enforcement and judicial systems. This is especially true in countries such as Honduras, El Salvador and Mexico.

The study also raises questions about U.S. assistance to Latin American and Caribbean security forces and whether our aid has had an impact on their effectiveness and accountability over the years. Since 2000, these twelve countries have collectively received over \$5.1 billion in U.S. military and police assistance. Large portions of these funds go to security projects that bolster heavily militarized police and security forces. In Mexico alone, the United States spent over \$545 million in security assistance and an additional \$488 million on justice reform between FY 2011 and FY 2014. Despite this assistance, the legitimacy of the Mexican government and its institutions continues to dwindle.

President Obama's request for \$1 billion in aid to Central America to address the "root causes" driving migration north may indicate a possible shift in how the administration and lawmakers are thinking about U.S. aid to the sub-region. However there are widespread concerns about the bill's provisions, and particularly the will of Central American leaders to implement the most crucial law enforcement and judicial reforms.

As the United States continues to review its aid to Latin American and Caribbean security forces, it will be important to factor in the citizen support for their law enforcement and judicial systems in order to determine ways forward and to evaluate future U.S. efforts. It may be time for the U.S. to rethink the nature of the initiatives it supports to ensure security throughout Latin America.

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