

AmericasBarometer *Insights*: 2015

Number 120

Crime, Corruption and Societal Support for Vigilante Justice: Ten Years of Evidence in Review

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Main Findings:

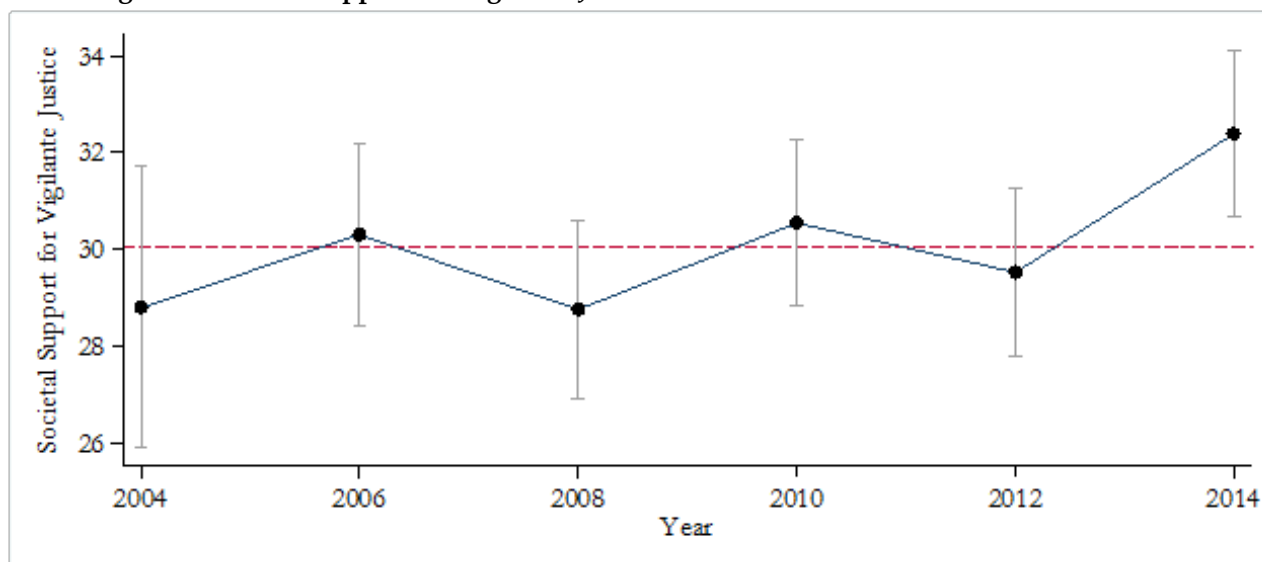
- In 2014, support for vigilante justice reached a 10-year high
- Suriname, Ecuador, and El Salvador are the countries in which vigilante justice is the most accepted
- Brazil, Bahamas, Uruguay, and Venezuela are the countries in which vigilante justice is the least accepted
- Variations in societal support within the countries of the Americas are linked to the prevalence of crime and police corruption

A number of countries in the Americas have seen individuals and groups of citizens taking the law into their own hands. Cases of vigilante justice¹ have caught the attention of scholars focused on Guatemala, Bolivia, Mexico, and, most recently, Brazil and Argentina (Bateson, 2013; De Souza Martins, 1991; Godoy, 2004; Goldstein, 2012). This scholarship finds that countries in the Americas manifest different levels of support for vigilante justice, both across time and space. What

E16. How much do you approve or disapprove of people taking the law into their own hands when the government does not punish criminals? (1 strongly disapprove-10 strongly approve).²

In order to measure societies' support for vigilante justice, I calculated each country-year's average support for this phenomenon using the data collected in the 134 studies that the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) has conducted since 2004 in 27 different countries of

Figure 1. Societal Support for Vigilante Justice in the Americas across Time (0 to 100 scale)



countries are most supportive of this phenomenon? How has support for vigilantism changed over the last ten years, and what explains that variation?

In the past six rounds (2004-2014) of the AmericasBarometer, LAPOP has asked citizens:

¹ Here “justice” is only used to note that the object of these actions is to punish illegal activities.

² Following LAPOP standards, I recoded this variable from its original 1 to 10 scale to run from 0 to 100.

³ This question was not included in Canada in 2008 and the Dominican Republic in 2004.

⁴ *Regional environment* refers to those variables that affect the continent as a whole and that vary from survey-wave to

the Americas.³

Changes in the degree that a particular society supports vigilante justice in any given year might be explained by factors related to the *regional environment*, the *national environment* and the *fluctuating conditions* within a country.⁴ Therefore, analyzing the entirety of the data is

survey-wave (e.g., changes in the questionnaire, news of a global impact, the global economy, etc.). The *national environment* references all characteristics that do not vary from year to year (e.g., geography, institutions, culture, etc.). Finally, the term *fluctuating conditions* points toward those factors that change across time and across countries (e.g., prevalence of crime, corruption, the country's economic condition, etc.).

not an easy task. For example, showing the changes in the grand average support for vigilantism over time may reveal differences that can be explained by the inclusion of different countries in different years rather than by changes in regional support for vigilantism. Similarly, comparing the overall average support for vigilante justice across each country over time can produce differences explained by different years being included in each country set rather than true differences in societies' support for vigilantism.⁵

To address these potential problems I created a country-year fixed effects OLS model. This model separates the three different sources of country-year level variance and lets me calculate more precise estimates of societal support for vigilante justice. In doing so, the model allows me to answer the questions asked at the beginning of this report.⁶ In this *Insights* report, using the results of this model (see Appendix Table 2), I show: a) the trend in support for vigilante justice across time; b) how countries rank with respect to their support for vigilante justice; and c) which countries in 2014 deviated the most from expectations generated by the statistical model. Finally, I test whether societal support for vigilante justice is sensitive to crime, police corruption, and democratic support.

The Regional Environment of the Americas

Results from the model (Appendix Table 2) show that 2.7% of the country-year variation in support for vigilante justice is explained by yearly changes in the *regional environment* (see

footnote 4).⁷ Moreover, the results displayed in the appendix (column 1 table 2) allow me to estimate the expected levels of societal support for vigilante justice in every wave of the AmericasBarometer while accounting for differences in the countries sampled.⁸

Figure 1 shows the estimated regional environment produced by the model for each of the waves of the AmericasBarometer and a dotted red line for the grand mean across waves and countries.⁹ First, it is worth noting that, as the dotted line shows, Americans (i.e. citizens of the Americas) have not been generally supportive of vigilantism over the last decade (the overall average is around 30.1 out of 100, where lower numbers represent fewer degrees of support). Second, the figure shows that the years 2006, 2010, and 2014 are the years in which the societies of the countries of the Americas have been the most supportive of vigilantism, with 2014 ranking as the year in which Americans were the most supportive of this type of behavior. Indeed, Americans were 2.86 degrees (on the 0 to 100 scale) more supportive ($p<.05$) of vigilante justice in 2014 than in 2012 and 3.62 points more supportive of this type of action than in 2008 (28.76 vs 32.38, $p<.01$).

⁵ For example, Mexico was surveyed in 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014 and Suriname was surveyed in 2010, 2012 and 2014.

⁶ As explained in Appendix 2, to estimate the model I first calculated the country means (using the sample weights for each country-year). Then I used these country means as a new source of data, eliminating individual-level variation. Finally, I ran an OLS model of the 134 country-year observations (for more detail see Appendix 2).

⁷ To obtain this percentage, I estimated a model that included only the year dummies. I found an r-squared of .027.

⁸In order to avoid missing data problems I created a merge from the AmericasBarometer Merged 2014 (v2.0) and AmericasBarometer Merged 2004-2012 v16.0 databases.

⁹ Table 3 in the appendix shows the seasonally corrected averages in comparison to the naïve averages.

National Environments

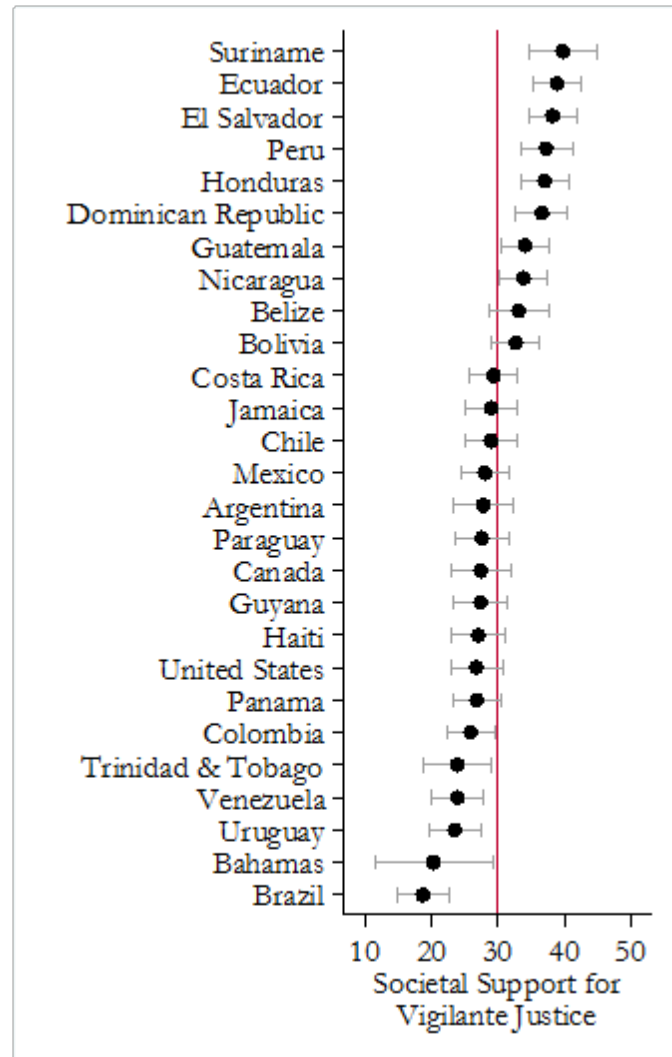
63.7% of the country-year variation in societies' support for vigilante justice is explained by factors that have remained stable within each country over the last ten years.¹⁰ These may include cultural and social structures; they may include factors unlikely to change in the middle and long term such as police culture, the overall rule of law, and the institutional design of political and judicial systems.

Using the results from the OLS model, it is possible to estimate the societal support for vigilante justice removing the effect of the time varying regional environment. That is, I use model 1 in the appendix to estimate the portion of societal support for vigilante justice due to the regional environment, and the national environment. Figure 2 shows the estimated average national level of support for each country with the time-varying effect of regional environment removed. We see that the countries of the Americas tend toward a relatively low average (30 out of 100, as shown by the red line). At 39.81, 38.93, and 38.25 degrees, Suriname, Ecuador, and El Salvador have the highest country-average support for vigilante justice in the Americas, respectively. At the other end, at 18.79, 20.37, and 38.25 points, Uruguay, the Bahamas, and Brazil are the countries with the lowest country-average support for vigilante justice in the Americas, respectively.¹¹

Atypical Countries in 2014

Besides being influenced by the national environment and the regional environment, a society's support for vigilantism fluctuates year-to-year as a function of the changing conditions within a country. During the last decade, some countries displayed levels of support for

Figure 2. Seasonally Corrected 2004-2014 Average Societal Support for Vigilante Justice



vigilante justice that simply do not match what would be expected given the results of the model.

For example, in the most recent wave, Paraguay, Haiti, and Jamaica were the most noticeably atypical cases. Based on the effects of the regional environment and the national environment, one would expect Paraguay to

would explain a much lower percentage of the total variance in individual support for vigilante justice.

¹¹ Note that the Bahamas was only surveyed in one year. See Table 1 for a list of the countries and years surveyed.

¹⁰ This estimate comes from the r-squared from a model in which only country dummies are included. Note that, since I aggregated the levels of support of vigilante justice by country-year, individual level variance was removed from the analysis. If this variance was incorporated, stable factors

report an average level of support of about 30.24 points in the 2014 round. Instead, this country registered a level of 42.12 points in its support for vigilante justice, 11.88 points above expectations. Similarly, Haiti and Jamaica registered 7.10 and 5.99 points higher than expected for 2014.¹² Figure 3 depicts these deviations from a country's trend in support for vigilante justice. These deviations can be attributed to changes within the country, such as shifting levels of crime, impunity, or police abuse like the ones that have taken place in the top four countries in Figure 3 (ABC, 2014; Peachey, 2014). It is precisely the aim of the next section to study how the changing levels of crime, police-corruption victimization and

support for democracy influence the fluctuations of societal support for vigilante justice.

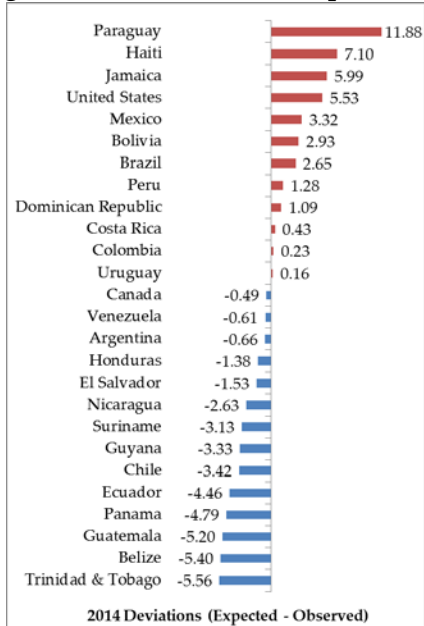
Fluctuating Conditions: Crime, Police, Democracy, and Societal Support for Vigilante Justice

As an important amount (33.6%) of the variation in societal support for vigilantism in the last decade cannot be explained by the regional or the national environment, there are likely other factors influencing this shift. What other fluctuating factors may influence the shifting societal support for vigilantism across the Americas? I propose three variables with which support for vigilante justice might be associated.

First, it is possible that support for vigilantism is a signal of low levels of democratic values.¹³ If this is so, we should observe that in the moments in which societies have been more pro-democratic societies they have also been less supportive of vigilante justice.¹⁴ Second, vigilante behavior may be a response to an environment of insecurity;¹⁵ if this is so, the public should be more supportive of vigilante justice in years in which there has been a higher proportion of citizens victimized by crime in their country.

Finally, support for vigilantism may be a response to inefficiency or corruption of the law enforcement institutions of a given country.¹⁶ If this is so, we should find societies to be more supportive of vigilante justice when there is a higher level of corruption victimization.

Figure 3. Deviations from Expectations



¹² Conversely, we find Guatemala, Chile, and Trinidad & Tobago which, respectively, scored 5.83, 5.92, and 7.09 score below what would be expected of them for 2014.

¹³ For example, Seligson (2003) finds democratic preferences mediate a number of demographic and attitudinal variables related to citizens' support for vigilante justice.

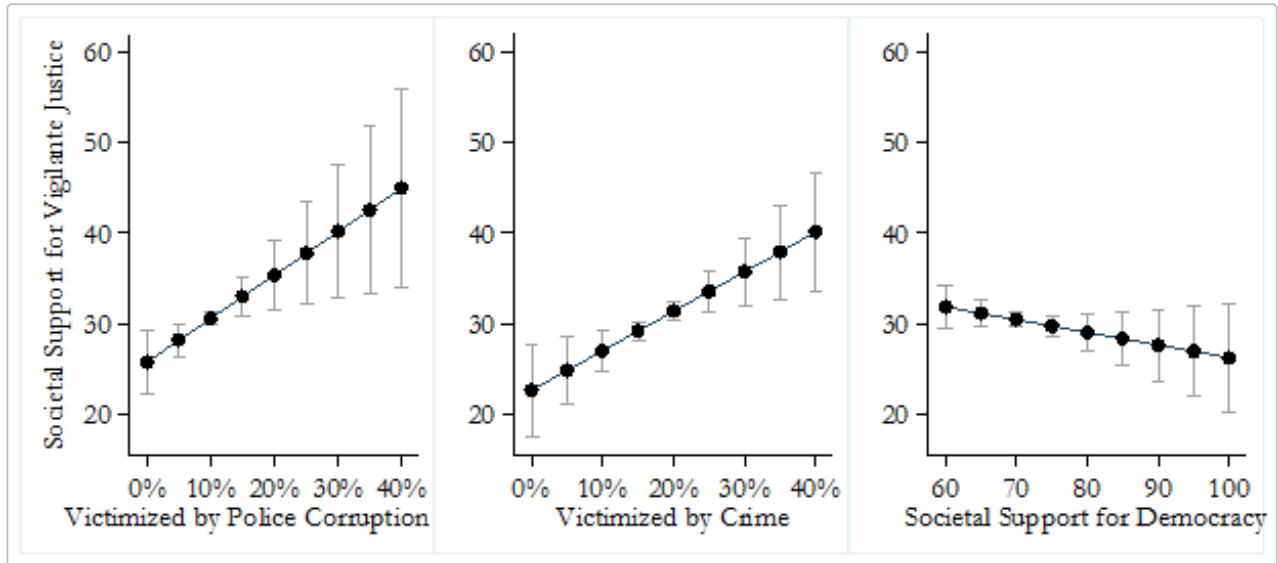
¹⁴ However, note that authoritarian societies could also be opposed to vigilante justice for two reasons. First, they might consider these actions to trespass over the purview of

the leader. Second, citizens may be more sympathetic to top-down, extralegal justice than bottom-up, vigilante actions.

¹⁵ For instance, in her individual-level analysis of Central Americans' attitudes towards vigilante justice, Malone (2012) finds fear of crime to be a significant predictor of citizens' support for vigilante justice.

¹⁶ Sabet (2013), for example, finds that dissatisfaction with the police is most strongly determined by direct experiences of corruption and argues that this may influence support for security coproduction.

Figures 4-6. Corruption, Crime, Support of Democracy and Support for Vigilante Justice (Left to Right)



To test whether the data are consistent with each of these views, I included these variables one at the time as independent variables within the country-year fixed effects model (see Appendix Models 2-5).

Results

As can be seen in Figures 4 and 5, the results are consistent with the idea that societal support for vigilantism is sensitive to the shifting levels of crime and corruption. Indeed, there is evidence that the percentage of citizens victimized by police corruption in a given country/year is significantly and positively associated with the level of public support for vigilante justice that the public will manifest in that country/year. A country that experiences an increase of ten percentage points in the percentage of the population victimized by police-corruption in a given year can expect an increase of about 4.6 points in its population's level of support for vigilante justice (Figure 4).

Crime and police corruption are positively associated with societal support for vigilante justice.

Similarly, the percentage of citizens victimized by crime in a country is significantly and positively associated with fluctuations in societal support for vigilante justice across the Americas. A ten percentage point increase in crime victimization is associated with a 3.6 point change in societal support for vigilante justice (Figure 5).

Finally, Figure 6 shows the relationship between societal support for democracy and support for vigilante justice. Although both variables seem to move in the expected direction, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that there is a statistically significant relation between both variables.

Conclusion

In sum, the evidence gathered over the last six rounds of the AmericasBarometer shows that although the Americas have gone through two previous waves of increased support for vigilantism (2006 and 2010), 2014 was the year in

which people in the Americas were the most supportive of vigilante justice. Further, the data show that over the previous decade, the societies of Suriname, Ecuador, and El Salvador have been the most supportive of vigilante justice. Paraguay, Haiti, Jamaica, and the United States are the ones that registered the strongest positive deviations from expectations for 2014. Finally, crime victimization and police corruption are strongly correlated with fluctuating levels of support for vigilante justice across countries, even when stable country characteristics and global variations are accounted for.

Implications

Overall, these results have three main implications for analysts and policy makers. First, the results confirm Layton, Rodríguez, Moseley, and Zizumbo-Colunga's (2014) finding of a rise of support for vigilantism in the Americas. Thus, it is important to bolster scholarly and policy efforts to understand and address this phenomenon. Second, these results imply that the variation we observe in vigilante justice across countries in a given year is due to both factors associated to country conditions and the regional environment. While some countries consistently score high in their support for vigilante justice, Paraguay, the United States, and Haiti scored higher than expected in 2014. Finally, once cultural and year-specific fluctuations are accounted for, variation in social support for vigilante justice seems to be strongly influenced by crime and police corruption. Thus, it seems that politicians will be at least as likely to reduce societal support for vigilante justice by implementing strong anti-police-corruption measures as they will be by implementing effective anti-crime policies.

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The data on which they are based can be found at: <http://vanderbilt.edu/lapop/raw-data.php>.

Funding for the 2014 round came mainly from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and Vanderbilt University. This *Insights* report is produced solely by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of USAID or any other supporting agency.

Appendix

	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
Mexico	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Guatemala	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
El Salvador	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Honduras	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nicaragua	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Costa Rica	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Panama	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Colombia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ecuador	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bolivia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Peru		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Paraguay		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chile		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Uruguay		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brazil		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Venezuela		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Argentina			✓	✓	✓	✓
Dominican Republic		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Haiti		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jamaica		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Guyana		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Trinidad & Tobago				✓	✓	✓
Belize			✓	✓	✓	✓
Suriname				✓	✓	✓
Bahamas						✓
United States		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Canada		✓		✓	✓	✓
Countries Included	10	22	23	26	26	27

2. Model

To estimate the models in Table 2:

- a) I estimated the average support for vigilante justice in every country in every year using the appropriate sample weights.
- b) Then, I created a new database (eliminating all individual level variance).
- c) And fitted an OLS model of the 134 country year observations in which the societal average support for vigilante justice is assumed to be normally distributed with a mean unique to each country and to each survey wave:

$$VJ_{ct} = \beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\phi}'\mathbf{YEAR}' + \boldsymbol{\theta}'\mathbf{COUNTRY}' + e_c$$

Where \mathbf{YEAR}' is a vector of dummy variables that uniquely identify each year, $\mathbf{COUNTRY}'$ is a vector of dummy variables that uniquely identify each country and e_c is the country-year level error term.

Estimates in Figure 1 are given by $VJ_t = \beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\phi}_t$ while countries are set at their means
Estimates in Figure 2 are given by $VJ_c = \beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\theta}_c$ while years are set at their means

- d) Then I aggregated each of the independent variables within each country and year. And specified an OLS model of the following form:

$$VJ_c = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Crime + \beta_2 Corruption + \boldsymbol{\phi}'\mathbf{YEAR}' + \boldsymbol{\theta}'\mathbf{COUNTRY}' + e_c$$

Where \mathbf{Crime} is the country-year's percentage of citizens victimized by crime, $\mathbf{Corruption}$ is the country-year's percentage of citizens to whom a police officer has requested a bribe.

Table 2. Effect of Crime Victimization, Police Corruption and Support for Democracy on Societal Support for Vigilante Justice in the Americas from 2004 to 2014

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
% Victimized by Crime		0.436*** (0.147)			0.322** (0.156)
% Victimized by Police Corruption			0.479*** (0.181)		0.342* (0.190)
Societal Support for Democracy				-0.141 (0.103)	
Guatemala	6.029** (2.551)	7.207*** (2.492)	9.859*** (2.856)	5.338** (2.582)	9.636*** (2.812)
El Salvador	10.20*** (2.551)	11.25*** (2.485)	17.12*** (3.594)	9.855*** (2.544)	15.92*** (3.584)
Honduras	9.057*** (2.551)	11.13*** (2.557)	13.68*** (3.019)	8.308*** (2.590)	13.89*** (2.973)
Nicaragua	5.801** (2.551)	7.886*** (2.558)	12.34*** (3.490)	5.938** (2.534)	12.01*** (3.438)
Costa Rica	1.321 (2.551)	3.473 (2.565)	8.281** (3.605)	2.583 (2.695)	7.884** (3.553)
Panama	-1.206 (2.551)	3.847 (2.994)	5.725 (3.597)	-1.271 (2.532)	7.479** (3.640)
Colombia	-2.119 (2.551)	-0.525 (2.518)	4.763 (3.584)	-1.632 (2.557)	3.976 (3.547)
Ecuador	10.88*** (2.551)	9.458*** (2.506)	14.97*** (2.906)	10.68*** (2.536)	12.75*** (3.055)
Bolivia	4.688* (2.551)	3.851 (2.476)	4.103* (2.470)	4.496* (2.536)	3.652 (2.440)
Peru	9.258*** (2.688)	6.258** (2.782)	10.44*** (2.630)	8.447*** (2.732)	7.885*** (2.869)
Paraguay	-0.414 (2.688)	1.917 (2.708)	3.135 (2.920)	0.422 (2.872)	3.844 (2.893)
Chile	0.891 (2.688)	2.535 (2.650)	10.20** (4.374)	1.727 (2.737)	8.755** (4.360)
Uruguay	-4.517* (2.688)	-4.799* (2.593)	4.004 (4.138)	-2.121 (3.192)	1.363 (4.269)
Brazil	-9.252*** (2.688)	-6.946** (2.706)	-1.307 (3.971)	-8.906*** (2.679)	-1.872 (3.917)
Venezuela	-4.144 (2.688)	-4.979* (2.607)	1.395 (3.334)	-2.512 (2.922)	-0.803 (3.450)
Argentina	-0.243 (2.872)	-1.670 (2.810)	4.602 (3.297)	1.922 (3.240)	2.190 (3.449)
Dominican Republic	8.558*** (2.688)	10.03*** (2.639)	12.79*** (3.046)	9.244*** (2.714)	12.67*** (2.998)
Haiti	-0.979 (2.688)	0.823 (2.662)	4.702 (3.368)	-1.053 (2.668)	4.412 (3.317)
Jamaica	0.959 (2.688)	6.465** (3.190)	8.347** (3.814)	1.451 (2.692)	10.31*** (3.871)

Crime, Corruption and Support for Vigilante Justice: Ten Years in Review

Daniel Zizumbo-Colunga

Guyana	-0.636 (2.688)	4.824 (3.181)	3.068 (2.947)	-0.134 (2.693)	6.044* (3.240)
Trinidad & Tobago	-4.102 (3.153)	-0.175 (3.317)	3.728 (4.211)	-3.395 (3.165)	4.423 (4.158)
Belize	5.162* (2.872)	9.416*** (3.119)	10.19*** (3.334)	5.840** (2.885)	11.92*** (3.387)
Suriname	11.77*** (3.153)	14.70*** (3.197)	20.05*** (4.331)	12.69*** (3.193)	19.88*** (4.263)
Bahamas	-7.675 (4.844)	-2.810 (4.950)	-2.438 (5.055)	-7.503 (4.807)	-0.310 (5.080)
United States	-1.197 (2.688)	1.892 (2.794)	8.879** (4.264)	0.371 (2.904)	8.428** (4.201)
Canada	-0.520 (2.871)	3.054 (3.020)	9.895** (4.539)	0.988 (3.060)	10.09** (4.467)
2006	1.507 (1.748)	1.003 (1.694)	0.661 (1.777)	1.793 (1.745)	0.628 (1.749)
2008	-0.0383 (1.740)	-0.477 (1.684)	-1.561 (1.765)	-0.0512 (1.727)	-1.459 (1.738)
2010	1.748 (1.720)	0.0518 (1.754)	0.384 (1.724)	1.610 (1.708)	-0.509 (1.751)
2012	0.728 (1.720)	-0.179 (1.686)	-0.847 (1.747)	0.620 (1.708)	-1.098 (1.723)
2014	3.591** (1.720)	2.879* (1.675)	1.864 (1.766)	3.270* (1.718)	1.801 (1.738)
Constant	26.60*** (2.210)	18.15*** (3.564)	17.92*** (3.917)	36.23*** (7.378)	14.15*** (4.266)
Observations	134	134	132	133	132
R-squared	0.665	0.692	0.691	0.673	0.704

2004 is the omitted year. Mexico is the omitted country. Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 3. Seasonally Corrected (Figure 2) Averages vs. Naïve Averages		
	Seasonally-Corrected Average	Naïve Average
Mexico	28.04956	27.86065
Guatemala	34.07871	33.88981
El Salvador	38.2509	38.06199
Honduras	37.10642	36.91751
Nicaragua	33.8508	33.6619
Costa Rica	29.37089	29.18199
Panama	26.84375	26.65485
Colombia	25.93068	25.74177
Ecuador	38.9308	38.7419
Bolivia	32.73755	32.54865
Peru	37.30712	37.36943
Paraguay	27.63602	27.69832
Chile	28.94065	29.00296
Uruguay	23.53266	23.59497
Brazil	18.79805	18.86036
Venezuela	23.90514	23.96745
Argentina	27.80636	27.86884
Dominican Republic	36.60773	36.67004
Haiti	27.07082	27.13312
Jamaica	29.0084	29.0707
Guyana	27.41308	27.47538
Trinidad & Tobago	23.94732	24.52503
Belize	33.21202	33.2745
Suriname	39.81686	40.39457
Bahamas	20.37496	22.52138
United States	26.85278	26.91509
Canada	27.52935	27.97803