

# AmericasBarometer Insights: 2011

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## Trust in the National Police

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**Executive Summary.** This AmericasBarometer *Insights* report compares and analyzes the degree of trust in the national police force across the Americas. We find a positive correlation between self-identifying as white (compared to all other groups) and trust in the police, while other factors such as a history of crime victimization, fear of crime, and victimization by corruption contribute negatively to people's perceptions of the national police force. These findings are consistent with our expectations based on our survey of extant scholarship. Our findings help us to better understand an important component of the rule of law in the Americas.

*LAPOP is pleased to note that this report was developed and written by Vanderbilt undergraduate students participating in a Vanderbilt University honors seminar (HNRS186, taught by Professor E. J. Zechmeister). Biographies of the authors are provided in the report appendix.*

*The Insights Series is co-edited by Mitchell A. Seligson, Amy Erica Smith, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister with administrative, technical, and intellectual support from the LAPOP group at Vanderbilt.*

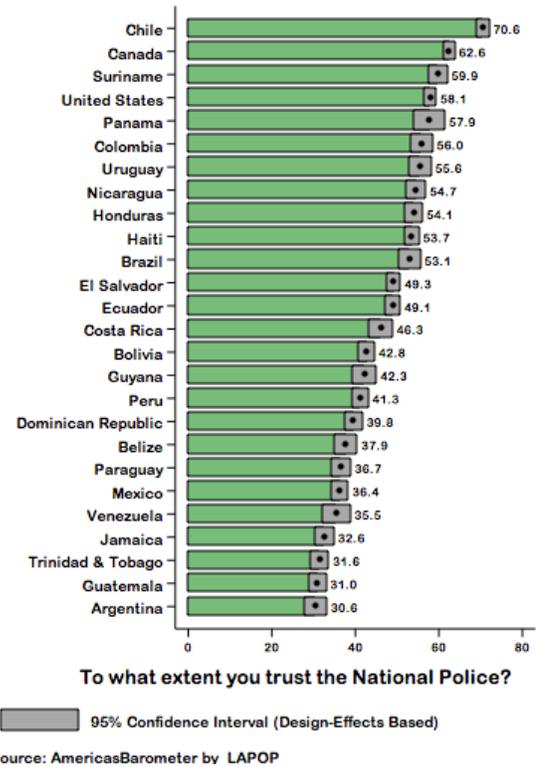
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Having a trustworthy national police force is important to a stable, well-functioning democracy. This is arguably the case in general, and may be even more important in countries coping with high levels of crime and violence. Concerns with issues of security in many Latin American and Caribbean countries are high and, in some cases, have increased in recent years.<sup>1</sup> In a number of countries, problems related to security and citizen-police relations have led governments to undertake reforms aimed at improving the capacity and profile of their police forces. Examples of such cases include Chile, Brazil, El Salvador, and Colombia, among others in the Americas. In Chile, for example, reforms reinforced the national police, and police role in crime prevention and control greatly increased in the early 2000s (Bailey and Dammert 2006, 16, 58-60).

Trust in the police force is important because security is one of the principal directives of a sovereign state. If people are unsure that the police can and will provide security and order, public confidence in the law enforcement, criminal justice, and judicial systems and potentially in the democratic regime more broadly will be undermined. Conversely, when citizen trust in the police increases, it can facilitate citizen involvement with local police services, public cooperation with the police, and compliance with the law (Jackson and Bradford 2010).

<sup>1</sup> Across the Americas in 2010, an average of 28.3 percent of individuals reported an issue related to security as the most important problem facing the country (Zechmeister and Seligson 2011). While this aggregate number does not reflect a significant increase in insecurity at the regional level when comparing to 2008, Zechmeister and Seligson (2011) report that in six cases (“Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Panama, Paraguay and Uruguay), the percentage of people indicating a security-related problem increased by 10 or more percentage points.” As is clear, the salience of the issue varies across countries and time.

Figure 1. Trust in the National Police



Why do some citizens trust the police more than others? In this *Insights* report<sup>2</sup>, we compare levels of trust in the national police across the Americas and examine individual factors that predict the extent to which one trusts the national police.

The data analyzed in this report are part of the AmericasBarometer 2010 survey, for which 43,990 people were surveyed across 26 countries.<sup>3</sup> In this wave, individuals from all 26 countries were asked to respond to the following question on a scale from one (“not at all”) to seven (“a lot”):

<sup>2</sup> Previous issues of the Insight series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications>. The data on which they are based is located at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/datasets>.

<sup>3</sup> Funding for the AmericasBarometer has mainly come from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important additional support has come from the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University.

## B18. To what extent do you trust the National Police?<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1 shows the mean responses to the question, with the values recalibrated on a 0-100 scale in order to conform to the LAPOP standard. A value of 0 reflects the attitude that the police force is “not at all” trusted, whereas a value of 100 represents the feeling that the police are trusted “a lot.” Dots on the bars indicate the average value for each country, while the grey sections indicate the 95% confidence interval.

There is relatively wide variance in average levels of trust in the national police across countries in the Americas. Countries such as Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago, Guatemala and Argentina report particularly low levels of trust while populations in countries such as Chile, Canada, Suriname, and the United States on average view the police as more trustworthy. Registering the highest levels of trust in the police by far is Chile.<sup>5</sup> There are a number of factors that could account for this, including Chile’s high level of human and economic development, but it may also be important that in the late 90s and early 2000s Chile significantly reformed its police and criminal justice system (Bailey and Dammert 2006, 16).

While Chile and a few other countries have fairly high values in Figure 1, it is noteworthy that more than half of the countries in the study have average values below the midpoint on the scale. This reflects a general sense of distrust in the police within the Americas. In the following sections, we assess factors that may help explain the differing levels of trust in the police.

<sup>4</sup> The percentage selecting not to answer this question was 1.16%. The analysis was conducted using STATA v10.1.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the other factors mentioned, the survey was taken soon after the earthquake in Chile in 2010; the role of the police in post-disaster efforts may have contributed to the comparatively high levels of trust we see here.

## Who Trusts the National Police?

Characteristics of individuals and the neighborhoods where they live may help explain variation in levels of trust in police. Therefore, we first explore the effects of a set of basic socioeconomic and demographic factors. Specifically, we assess the extent to which an individual’s wealth, size of town of residence, age, gender, and education predict trust in the police.<sup>6</sup>

*[There exists] a general sense of distrust in the police within the Americas.*

In a previous *Insights* report, the following characteristics were shown to predict an increased likelihood of being abused by the police: being male,

being a young adult, and living in a large city or metro area (Cruz 2009).<sup>7</sup> We expect that the demographic groups most likely to experience abuse at the hands of the police will be the same ones who are the least likely to trust the police.

In Figure 2, each independent variable included in the analysis is listed on the vertical (y) axis. The impact of each of these variables on trust in police is shown graphically by a dot, which if located to the right of the vertical “0” line indicates a positive contribution, and if to the left of the “0” line a negative contribution. Statistically significant contributors are shown

<sup>6</sup> The variables are as follows: (a) “Quintiles of Wealth,” which runs from 1 (Least Wealth) to 5 (Most Wealth); (b) “Size of City/Town” which runs from 1 (Rural Area) to 5 (National Capital); (c) “Age,” which runs from 18 (16 in the case of Nicaragua) to 96 years of age; (d) “Female,” coded 1 for women and 0 for men; (e) “Education” which runs from 0 to 18 years of completed education. We omit the United States and Canada from the analysis in order to focus the report on Latin America and the Caribbean, as is standard for most reports in the *Insights* series. Country fixed effects are included but not shown in the figure. See the Appendix for the full regression output.

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the question used in the 2008 survey to examine police abuse was not subsequently included in the 2010 survey, so we are unable to examine the explicit relationship between police abuse and trust in the national police at this time.

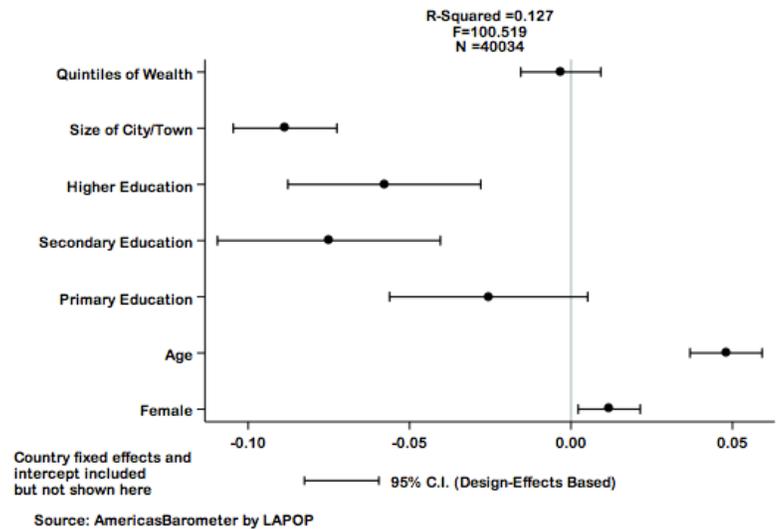
by confidence interval lines stretching to the left and right of each dot; only when the confidence intervals do not overlap the vertical “0” line is the variable significant (at .05 or better). The relative strength of each variable is indicated by standardized coefficients (i.e., “beta weights”).

As the results in Figure 2 show, the size of city has a negative relationship with trust in the police. In other words, those living in small, rural communities are more likely to trust the police. This measure has a particularly large effect compared to the other variables in the model. We find that education is not a linear predictor of trust in police. Those with the highest levels of education (post-secondary) and those with the lowest levels of education (primary education) are more likely to trust the police than those who received an average level of education (secondary education). Meanwhile, age has a positive correlation, indicating that older citizens tend to have more trust in police. Gender is just barely statistically significant, but the graph reveals that women tend to trust in the police somewhat more than their male counterparts. Interestingly, wealth does not have a statistically significant relationship to trust in the national police.

## Corruption, Race/Ethnicity, and Crime Victimization as Predictors of Trust in the Police

In expanding the analysis beyond basic socioeconomic and demographic factors, we focus on four experience-related measures that may help predict trust in the police: corruption; race/ethnicity; crime victimization; and fear of crime victimization. First, we believe one’s exposure to corruption has a significant impact on level of trust. Citizens who have witnessed bribes may be less inclined to trust that the

**Figure 2. Socio-economic and demographic characteristics predicting levels of trust in the national police, 2010**



police have their best interests in mind (Seligson 2002, Chevigny 1990). Seligson (2002, p. 324) argues that exposure to corruption reduces “belief in the political system and reduces interpersonal trust.” Carrying this logic forward, we argue that specific experience with corruption by police officers will decrease the trust one has in the police.

In addition to exposure to corruption, we believe race/ethnicity can predict trust in the police. It is possible that certain racial/ethnic groups may simply be more likely to face discrimination or other mistreatment at the hands of the police. While admittedly not a study focused on Latin America or the Caribbean, Lai and Zhao (2010) find that in the United States, African Americans hold the least favorable views of the police, followed by Hispanics and then whites. We recognize the significant variation in race and ethnic demographic profiles across the Americas (both within the societies at large and within the police forces), but as an exploratory exercise we nonetheless assess whether those who self-identify as white express greater trust in the police compared to all others.

Lastly, we believe one's experience with crime victimization can predict trust in the police. According to Malone (2010, p. 116), "as respondents grow more fearful of victimization in their immediate environments, they are significantly less likely to support the police... This is likely due to the fact that crime prevention is the principal task of police... Consequently, victims of crime are more prone to blame the police, the most visible faces of public service provision." As a result, we predict higher levels of individual crime victimization will lead to decreased levels of police trust. Likewise, we expect that an individual's fear of crime victimization will also be associated with lower levels of trust in the national police.

With these factors, we predict trust in the police with a regression model that includes measures of experience with police corruption<sup>8</sup>; race<sup>9</sup>/ethnicity, fear of crime victimization<sup>10</sup>, and actual crime victimization<sup>11</sup> (using measures of

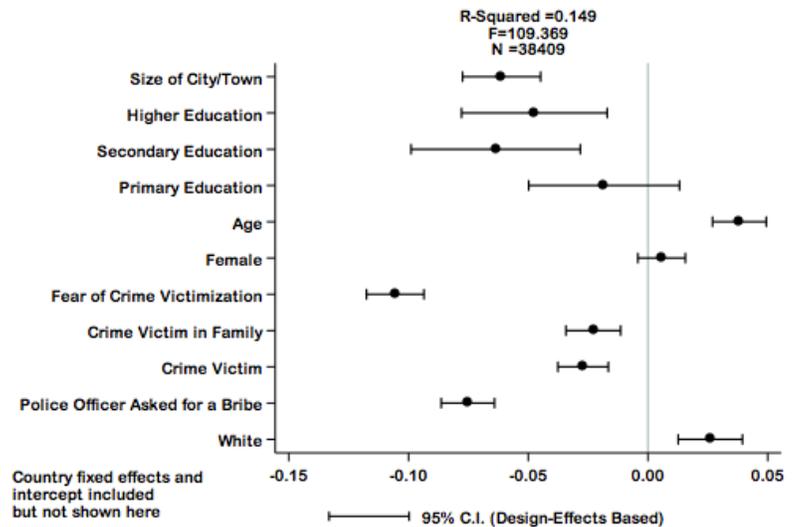
<sup>8</sup> Police corruption was measured by EXC2: "Has a police officer asked you for a bribe in the last 12 months?" Responses were coded 0 for "no" and 1 for "yes."

<sup>9</sup> Race was measured by ETID: "Do you consider yourself white, mestizo, indigenous, black, mulatto, or of another race?" Responses were coded 1 for "white," 2 for "mixed," 3 for "indigenous," 4 for "black," 5 for "mulatto," 6 for "moreno," 7 for "other," 9 for "Chinese," 10 for "Indian," 11 for "creole," and 12 for "Spanish." In the analysis presented here, we code those responding "white" to "1" and all others to "0", the baseline category.

<sup>10</sup> Fear of crime victimization was measured using the question AOJ11: "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?" The variable is coded here so that higher values indicate greater security.

<sup>11</sup> Responses to the crime victimization questions, as measured by the variables VIC1EXT and VIC1HOGAR, were coded either as 0 or 1, where 1 represented "yes" and 0 represented "no." VIC1EXT asked whether the respondent had been a victim of any type of crime in the past twelve months while VIC1HOGAR asked whether anyone else

**Figure 3. Multivariate regression analysis of the determinants of trust in the national police, 2010**



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

both the individual's and their family members' victimization). The model also includes the same socioeconomic and demographic measures shown in Figure 2 and country fixed effects, though the latter are not shown for the sake of brevity (for the full regression output see the Appendix).

The results are presented in Figure 3. Considering first the socioeconomic and demographic factors, we see that the results remain pretty much the same as we found in Figure 2 for education and wealth (insignificant), size of city/town (significant and negative), and age (significant and positive); meanwhile, the coefficient on female, which was significant but small in relative size in Figure 2, is no longer significant.

Turning to the variables of interest in this section, the results in Figure 3 reflect our expectations. Self-identification as white has a significant, positive correlation with trust in the police, while the variable measuring victimization by police corruption (a police

living in the respondent's household had been a victim of a crime in the previous twelve months.

officer asking for a bribe) has a significant, negative correlation. Furthermore, the variables measuring crime victimization (both for family members and for the respondent) negatively and significantly correspond with trust in police. It is important to note there is a stronger negative effect found for those who have been targets of crime compared to those whose relatives were targets of crime. This reveals that the extent of direct victimization by crime is an important factor to consider. Lastly, the variable measuring fear of crime also correlates negatively with trust in police. It is important to note that this variable has a stronger negative correlation to trust in police than actual individual crime victimization. Consequently, this reveals that an individual's perception of security is an important factor to remember when analyzing trust in the police.

In short, our findings elucidate a reality of the police system in Latin America: faith in the police is diminished by negative encounters with the police, among certain racial/ethnic groups (compared to those identifying as white), and among those who have been victims of crime or fear becoming a victim of crime. More simply, trust in the police in Latin America and the Caribbean is unequally distributed.

## **Conclusions**

An effective police force is essential to keeping order and safeguarding the rule of law. This police force cannot be effective, however, if citizens do not trust it. In this report, we examined the differing levels of trust in the police as recorded by the 2010 AmericasBarometer survey, and uncovered some of the factors that appear to result in lower or heightened amounts of trust among individuals.

We hypothesized four different factors, beyond basic socioeconomic and demographic variables, that likely affect the level of trust in the police

within a country: victimization by corruption (in the form of bribes), racial identity, recent experience with crime victimization, and fear of crime. The results presented corresponded to our expectations, such that self-identification as white is positively correlated with trust in the police, while being a victim of a crime, having a crime victim in the family, fearing crime, and having a police officer ask for a bribe all are negative predictors of trust in the police.

Comparatively, corruption (as measured by a police officer asking for a bribe) had a large effect on trust in the national police. The effect of ethnicity was less substantial, and this may be due to the country-to-country variation with respect to skin colors, stereotypes, and discrimination. A more complex analysis of race/ethnicity and trust in the police was beyond the scope of this report, but we suggest that future scholarship should examine this topic closely.

Developing national trust in the police is key to nation building and, as well, critical to democratic stability. With an effective and credible police force, citizens are more likely to engage in civic activities and feel safe within their own neighborhoods. They are also more likely to feel that government is doing an effective job because the police force is one of the most public arms of the government. In countries where trust in the police is low, our research and analysis underscores the importance of investing in policies of police reform in order to eliminate corrupt practices and bolster programs that deter criminal activity. In these ways, the national police forces can gain credibility in the eyes of the citizenry and pave the way towards a more stable, high quality democratic future.

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## Appendix

Table 1. Demographic Predictors of Trust in the National Police

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Female	0.012*	0.005
Age	0.048*	0.006
Primary Education	-0.026	0.016
Secondary Education	-0.075*	0.018
Higher Education	-0.058*	0.015
Size of City/Town	-0.089*	0.008
Quintiles of Wealth	-0.003	0.006
Mexico	-0.120*	0.010
Guatemala	-0.161*	0.010
El Salvador	-0.045*	0.009
Honduras	-0.026*	0.010
Nicaragua	-0.012	0.010
Costa Rica	-0.067*	0.011
Panama	0.013	0.011
Colombia	-0.001	0.010
Ecuador	-0.054*	0.013
Bolivia	-0.107*	0.013
Peru	-0.083*	0.010
Paraguay	-0.119*	0.010
Chile	0.107*	0.010
Brazil	-0.015	0.013
Venezuela	-0.121*	0.013
Argentina	-0.144*	0.011
Dominican Republic	-0.102*	0.010
Haiti	-0.024*	0.011
Jamaica	-0.146*	0.011
Guyana	-0.092*	0.012
Trinidad & Tobago	-0.153*	0.011
Belize	-0.121*	0.012
Suriname	0.042*	0.011
Constant	0.003	0.007
<i>R Squared</i>		0.127
<i>Number of Observations</i>		36192

\* $p < 0.05$

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at \* $p < 0.05$  two tailed.

**Table 2. Predictors of Trust in the National Police**

	Coefficient	Standard Error
White	0.026*	0.007
Police Officer Asked for a Bribe	-0.075*	0.006
Crime Victim	-0.027*	0.005
Crime Victim in Family	-0.023*	0.006
Fear of Crime Victimization	-0.106*	0.006
Female	0.006	0.005
Age	0.038*	0.006
Primary Education	-0.018	0.016
Secondary Education	-0.064*	0.018
Higher Education	-0.047*	0.016
Size of City/Town	-0.061*	0.008
Quintiles of Wealth	0.000	0.006
Mexico	-0.098*	0.010
Guatemala	-0.143*	0.010
El Salvador	-0.027*	0.009
Honduras	-0.017	0.009
Nicaragua	-0.003	0.010
Costa Rica	-0.067*	0.011
Panama	0.015	0.012
Colombia	0.005	0.010
Ecuador	-0.028*	0.013
Bolivia	-0.077*	0.013
Peru	-0.055*	0.010
Paraguay	-0.106*	0.010
Chile	0.105*	0.010
Brazil	-0.015	0.013
Venezuela	-0.104*	0.012
Argentina	-0.130*	0.011
Dominican Republic	-0.087*	0.010
Haiti	-0.005	0.011
Jamaica	-0.140*	0.011
Guyana	-0.081*	0.013
Trinidad & Tobago	-0.146*	0.011
Belize	-0.104*	0.012
Suriname	0.046*	0.011
Constant	0.003	0.007
<i>R Squared</i>		0.149
<i>Number of Observations</i>		38804

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at \*p<0.05 two tailed.

**Appendix: Author Biographies\***

Nabeela Ahmad is a junior at Vanderbilt University, majoring in French and Public Policy. She is from Oak Ridge, TN. After graduating, she hopes to move to New York to pursue a career in public and media relations.

Victoria Hubickey is a senior at Vanderbilt University double majoring in Political Science and Latin American Studies with a minor in Spanish. She is from Huntsville, Alabama and is planning to attend law school in the Fall of 2011.

Francis McNamara, IV, is a sophomore at Vanderbilt University studying economics and mathematics. He is from Louisville, KY, and he intends to attend graduate school and ultimately work in finance.

*\* Author names are listed alphabetically. Federico Batista Pereira, a graduate student in Political Science at Vanderbilt University, acted as a technical consultant on this report.*