

## **The Impact of Criminal Violence on System Support in Latin America**

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### **Abstract**

What is the impact of exposure to criminal violence on system support in Latin America? The increase in criminal violence in the region since the return to democratic rule makes of this a timely question. Several scholars have demonstrated the impact of a series of variables (political performance, economic performance, interpersonal trust, perception of corruption) on citizens' system support. The goal of this study is to assess the impact of two additional variables (victimization and perception of violence) that have been neglected in the literature. I test the impact of exposure to violence on system support by using survey data from the 2004 edition of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). My findings demonstrate that both victimization and high perception of violence have a negative impact on regime support in Latin America.

## **The Impact of Criminal Violence on System Support in Latin America**

### **Introduction**

Does criminal violence affect system support? What is the impact of victimization and high perception of violence on citizens' support for political institutions? The explosion of criminal violence in Latin America in the last twenty years offers an opportunity to try to answer these questions. Many Latin American countries democratized at some point between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s. The focus of the scholarly community has now shifted from democratic transitions to the quality and performance of these new democracies (Smith 2005). The dramatic increase in the levels of criminal violence may pose a redoubtable threat to the stability of democratic institutions in Latin America. Yet, remarkably, this critical issue has received very limited attention in the literature.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I will look into one potentially negative effect of the increase of violence on the health of democracy in Latin America. I will analyze the impact of skyrocketing criminal violence on the legitimacy of democratic institutions in the region. It is essential to make progress in our understanding of the causes of political distrust in these new democracies, since it has been demonstrated that a decrease in political support can lead to political instability. In fact, political distrust can be self-reinforcing and pave the way for further dissatisfaction with political leaders and governmental institutions, which can lead to public support for measures that would radically alter institutional arrangements (Hetherington 1998). Moreover, low levels of system support can trigger unconventional and aggressive political behaviors that pose a threat to the

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<sup>1</sup> Bergman (2006) argues that the explosion of criminality in Latin America in general has not triggered significant scholarly attention. It is clearly the case in the field of political science.

established political order, especially if low regime support is accompanied by feelings of high personal influence and belief in the efficacy of past collective political aggression (Muller 1977; Muller and Jukam 1977). On the contrary, citizens who trust political institutions are more likely to engage in conventional forms of political participation, including contacting public officials and involvement in political parties (Smith 2009). Finally, political trust drives compliance with the policies implemented by governmental authorities. As Tyler (2006: 375) lucidly points out, “because of legitimacy, people feel that they ought to defer to decisions and rules, following them voluntarily out of obligation rather than out of fear of punishment or anticipation of reward.” This compliance is essential because it eliminates the need to enforce policies through coercive and costly means --especially during times of crisis--. In sum, people who trust political institutions become self-regulating (Gamson 1968; Tyler and Huo 2002; Tyler 2006).

This paper will proceed as follows. First, I will briefly present the increase in criminal violence and in the perception of insecurity in Latin America since the beginning of the 1990s. Second, I will review the literature that has investigated the causes of support for political institutions. From this discussion, I will derive two hypotheses that will be tested in my third section using data from the 2004 LAPOP (Latin American Public Opinion Project) surveys. Finally, I will conclude by presenting the implications of my findings.

### **Criminal violence in Latin America**

One of the major socio-political problems facing Latin America today is the increase in criminality that affects all countries in the region. Two main sets of factors contribute to this phenomenon. First, criminality is triggered by illicit transnational flows, such as drug trafficking

and the proliferation of small arms. In fact, as a result of the US-led “war on drugs” a division of labor has been established, and many more Latin American countries now participate in the production, transshipment, and distribution of illicit drugs, which has led to a notorious increase in the levels of violence in the poor urban areas (Tickner 2007). Second, internal factors feed insecurity in the region. The implementation of neoliberal policies in the 1990s resulted in an increase in the levels of socio-economic inequality (Bulmer-Thomas 1996). Some analysts believe that this inequality is the driving force behind the growing levels of violence in Latin America (Hopenhayn 2002). The states of the region are incapable of coping with the increase in criminality. So far, Latin American states have been unable to assure the implementation and the effectiveness of the laws and policies they make to fight insecurity. The police are sometimes completely absent from the most dangerous areas. In other cases, the police respond to the increased insecurity with arbitrary violence, which contributes to an aggravation of the perception of insecurity among citizens (Brinks 2008). Moreover, the corrupt and inefficient judicial system existing in most Latin American countries leads to a generalized impunity. For instance, only a slight minority of homicides committed in the region is subjected to a complete judicial process. This impunity may increase the incentives to engage in violence for potential criminals (Estévez 2003; Manrique 2006).

The widespread increase in the homicide rates in Latin America suffices to show the stark consequences of the explosion of criminal violence that Latin America has suffered in the last twenty years. Table 1 shows the evolution of the homicide rate in different Latin American countries between 1995 and 2006. The upward trend in the homicide rates is visible in almost every case.

[Table 1 about here]

### **System Support: Review of the Literature**

The issue of political support has attracted considerable scholarly attention, especially since the beginning of the Third Wave of democratization, which brought about many fragile democracies in which political legitimacy has wavered (Inglehart 2003). I aim to expand this literature by assessing the impact of high criminality on support for political institutions.

Political support has been defined as the way in which a person evaluatively orients himself toward the political system –i.e. political institutions and the values undergirding the regime– through his attitudes or his behaviors (Easton 1975). Easton’s original conceptualization of political support was very broad. Easton identified three objects of political support: the political community, the regime, and the authorities (Easton 1965). Since the publication of this seminal work, the issue of regime support –i.e. support for political institutions and regime values- and support for political authorities has received considerable scholarly attention. Support for the performance of political authorities is associated with *specific support*, while the concept of *diffuse support* is associated with the citizens’ attitudes toward the political system (i.e. political institutions). In this paper, I will focus on diffuse support or system support, even if I will control for the possibility of a positive correlation between specific support and diffuse support, as this is a hypothesis that has been advanced in the literature. Political support is very closely linked to the concept of political legitimacy and trust in government institutions. Political trust refers to the evaluation of the performance of the political institutions according to normative expectations (Miller 1974b).

The mainstream explanation of political support at the individual level is the performance of government. Some scholars focus on the *political performance* of the governmental authorities.

Miller (1974a, 1974b) focuses on structural problems of the political system that can have a negative impact on political support. He argues that sustained discontent may crystallize when members of a given social group in a divided society are continuously unable to influence the political sphere through voting or other means. When a high proportion of individuals in a country feel powerless to prevent political outcomes unfavorable to them, cynicism may become widespread and lead to a decline in support for the political system. Another view presents the decrease in political trust as a more contingent reaction to the performance of incumbent political leaders. In short, a loss of political support simply reflects dissatisfaction with the authorities holding power at a given point in time (Citrin 1974; Citrin and Green 1986). More recent work has also emphasized the importance of political performance on support for democratic regimes, especially in new democracies. Mishler and Rose (2001) show that transitional governments can generate system support by responding effectively to public priorities and by protecting the newly acquired freedoms.

Another strand of the literature looks into the impact of the governmental *economic performance* on popular support for political institutions. It is hypothesized that political authorities are held accountable for how they manage the economy. Some works have shown that economic downturn has only a limited impact on political support in established democracies –e.g. Western European countries– that benefit from high levels of legitimacy (Clarke et al. 1993; Finkel et al. 1989). However, it is less clear which is the impact of economic performance on support for democratic political systems in Third Wave democracies. While some of the scholars studying Eastern European transitions show that the economic conjuncture constitutes a poor predictor of support for democratic institutions (Evans and Whitefield 1995; Gibson 1996), others advance that economic performance and successful market reforms are key to build regime support

(Kitschelt 1992; Mishler and Rose 2001). Mattes and Bratton (2007) show that in Sub-Saharan Africa political learning and the acquisition of a civic culture are at the roots of popular attitudes to democracy, while economic considerations have a limited role in shaping the attitudes of individuals toward democratic political institutions. In light of this scholarly debate, it is important to control for this variable in the context of the fragile Latin American democracies. In fact, it is plausible that in this region poor economic performance has much more dire consequences on trust for governmental institutions than in more developed regions of the world. During democratic transitions, citizens have high –and sometimes unrealistic– expectations about the economy. It is possible that these deceived expectations in turn create political dissatisfaction (Przeworski 1991, Rose et al. 1999).

Other explanations have also been proposed to account for different levels of political support in different contexts. Inglehart (2003) is the best representative of the *modernization approach*. In his view, economic development gradually leads to a change in attitudes and the emergence of ‘self-expression values’ –a syndrome of tolerance, trust, a participatory outlook, and emphasis on freedom of expression– which in turn bring rising mass support for democracy. The *social capital approach* advances that the participation in social networks –and especially high levels of interpersonal trust– drive confidence in political institutions (Brehm and Rahm 1997). It has also been demonstrated that conventional *political participation* –i.e. campaigning and voting– is positively correlated with support for the entire political system (Finkel 1985, 1987). Finally, it has been shown that *negative media coverage* of political life can lead to cynicism and increasing levels of dissatisfaction with political institutions (Miller et al. 1979).

These theoretical developments have emerged in response to political events in the United States, where they were first tested. However, a growing body of literature analyzes the level of political support in the fragile Latin American democracies. One part of this burgeoning literature applies the theoretical frameworks presented above to the Latin American context. For example, Power and Clark (2001) demonstrate that high interpersonal trust is also a positive predictor of regime support in Latin America. Graham and Sukhtankar (2004) analyze the impact of economic crisis on support for democratic institutions in the region and reach the conclusion that satisfaction with the way democratic institutions are working has decreased.

However, other theoretical developments try to assess political support in the Latin American context in a more original way. In his study of the impact of corruption on regime legitimacy in Latin America, Seligson (2002) demonstrates that exposure to corruption leads to an erosion of political support at the individual level. Other studies look into the impact of local government performance on citizen system support in Bolivia and Argentina, and conclude that dissatisfaction with local political institutions can lead to a decrease in support for the regime (Hiskey and Seligson 2003; Weitz-Shapiro 2008). This is a fascinating finding in the context of Latin America where formal democratic institutions at the national level often coexist with authoritarian enclaves at the local level (Gibson 2006).

In a recent and rich analysis of the sources and consequences of the different dimensions of legitimacy, Booth and Seligson (2009) demonstrate that -in addition to personal experiences and attitudes- demographic variables have an impact on the degree of system support expressed by individuals. In particular, they show that age, gender, and education influence support for political institutions. Young individuals tend to be more supportive of regime institutions than older citizens. Women are also more likely than men to support the political institutions of their



country. Finally, more educated respondents tend to express lower levels of system support. According to Booth and Seligson (2009: 115) less educated citizens “have less capacity for critical analysis of various facets of regime performance than persons with more advanced education”. In my statistical analysis, I include variables controlling for these demographic characteristics of the respondents.

The issue of the impact of criminal violence on political support in Latin America has been completely neglected until very recently. In the last decade, some works focusing exclusively on Central America started to address this issue. Orlando Pérez (2004) analyzes how democratic legitimacy is affected by public insecurity in El Salvador and Guatemala. One of the limitations of this article is that the questions asked to the survey respondents were different in El Salvador and in Guatemala. It is then not certain that the data collected by the author is comparable and that his findings are reliable. While much more sophisticated on the methodological front, the work of José Miguel Cruz (2003) still begs the question of the generalizability of his conclusions. Cruz demonstrates that criminality and violence have a negative impact on regime legitimacy in three Central American countries (Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador). But, as was seen in Table 1, criminal violence is more widespread in these three countries (especially El Salvador and Guatemala) than in most other Latin American countries. This paper will try to assess if the findings of Cruz are also valid in other countries in Latin America, where criminal violence has also increased considerably but still remains at much lower levels. Another recent contribution explores how violence affects support for political institutions in Latin America (Richard and Booth 2008). But the authors focus on political violence and political terror, thereby ignoring the more timely preoccupation with criminal violence.

The present paper intends to fill the gaps identified in the previous works, in order to gain a broader understanding of the impact of criminal violence on political support in Latin American countries. I contend that crime-related variables may be essential for understanding system support in Latin America, where criminal violence has increased exponentially since the return to democratic rule. Victimization and high perception of violence may lead to a decrease in support for the political system for three main reasons. First, Latin American citizens exposed to criminal violence may become disenchanted with a political system that is unable to respond efficiently in one of their main areas of concern (public security). Second, they may grow dissatisfied with a judicial system that fails to punish those responsible for the increasing levels of violence. Third, direct or indirect exposure to criminal violence may have a negative impact on interpersonal trust which in turn negatively affects system support.

This discussion yields the following two hypotheses:

**H1:** *Individuals who are victims of violence tend to have lower levels of system support.*

**H2:** *Individuals who perceive that criminal violence is high in their country tend to have lower levels of system support.*

## **Data and Method**

### **Data**

The level of analysis that will be of interest in this paper is the individual. I will analyze if individuals suffering directly or indirectly from criminal violence distrust government

institutions.<sup>2</sup> Survey data is the best way to look into this issue. I will draw on the 2004 series of surveys conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) of the University of Pittsburgh.<sup>3</sup> The LAPOP surveys are constructed very carefully so as to maximize their representativeness. The sampling process involves multi-stage stratification by country, and then sub-stratification within each country by major geographic region to increase precision. Within each primary sampling unit (PSU) the survey respondents are selected randomly.<sup>4</sup> The surveys are conducted in Spanish, but local language translations of the questionnaire are also available (Mayan translations for Guatemala, Quechua and Aymara for Ecuador and Bolivia).

The big advantage of LAPOP surveys to understand public opinion trends in Latin America is their broad comparability. The same questions are asked to respondents in different countries across Latin America, which facilitates a comparative analysis. However, some questions of interest for this study were asked only in some countries. For example, as Central America is more affected by criminal violence and has more fragile institutions than other countries in Latin America, more questions were asked in the surveys of this region related to these topics.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, if a large proportion of individuals distrust government institutions, negative consequences at the aggregate level may emerge. Moreover, although individuals are the ones holding these orientations, the level of political support individuals have may be influenced by their social interactions.

<sup>3</sup> Since then, LAPOP has moved to its current institutional home at Vanderbilt University, where it is affiliated to the Center for the Americas.

<sup>4</sup> The survey's selection of respondents applies quotas for sex and age at the household level. Selection at every other stage is done randomly based on proportion to size. More technical information about each survey can be obtained in the website of the Latin American Public Opinion Project: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys.php>

Nonetheless, enough relevant questions were asked in all the countries to allow me to conduct this analysis.

The 2004 edition of LAPOP includes ten countries.<sup>5</sup> Among these countries we find Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama. Although crime rates have increased in the last twenty years in all these countries, the level of criminal violence is much lower in these states than in countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Hence, the data allows us to evaluate if the conclusions of Cruz (2003) about the negative correlation between criminal violence and support for political institutions in the three most violent countries in Central America hold in other Latin American countries where crime rates are lower.

### **Method**

The relationship between support for political institutions and the two independent explanatory factors of interest (victimization and perception of violence) is estimated by regressing relevant variables identified in the LAPOP surveys.

The concept of political legitimacy (or political trust) is multidimensional. Refining Easton's conceptualization, Pippa Norris (1999) argues that legitimacy has five components: political community, regime principles, regime performance, regime institutions, and political actors. This study evaluates the impact of exposure to crime on *diffuse support for regime institutions*. It is preferable to use multiple related survey items to insure the construct validity of a concept such as "support for political institutions" (Dalton 2004, Booth and Seligson 2009). Hence, I construct

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<sup>5</sup> The statistical analysis will be conducted with data from Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama.

my dependent variable “system support” by creating an index of three variables that tap support for the political system (see Table 2).

[Table 2 about here]

This index of system support has high construct validity, as indicated by standard reliability statistics (Cronbach’s alpha: .801). Moreover, Booth and Seligson (2009) carried out a confirmatory factor analysis of the different dimensions of legitimacy mentioned above using the same data used in this paper (the 2004 wave of LAPOP surveys). The three items that compose my index loaded strongly in the factor the authors label “support for regime institutions”, clearly distinct from the other dimensions of legitimacy.

I use two items from the surveys as my main independent variables (see Table 3). The first item measures perception of violence in the neighborhood. A more general question tapping insecurity at the level of the country was asked only in some countries. Hence, we cannot integrate this question to our study. The second item measures whether the respondent was victim of a crime in the past year.

[Table 3 about here]

In the multivariate model that follows, I also include a series of survey items that allow me to control for the different factors that have been related to system support in previous studies.<sup>6</sup> Following the standard procedures used by LAPOP scholars (e.g. Booth and Seligson, 2009), I recoded all the independent variables -except the dummy variables- to the range of zero to 100 in order to reduce the measurement effects of differently coded variables in the statistical analysis.

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<sup>6</sup> Appendix 1 provides the questions from LAPOP surveys used to measure these different factors. Appendix 2 provides descriptive statistics for all the variables included in the analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The first two models of the paper are ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with robust standard errors using individual-level characteristics to predict system support. Table 4 presents the OLS regressions estimating the correlation between system support and the independent variables of interest (perception of violence and victimization). The difference between models 1 and 2 is that the second model excludes the most violent countries (Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) from the analysis. The other explanatory factors identified in the literature are incorporated into the models as control variables. I also include dummy variables for each country to measure whether significant national characteristics (unexplained by the model) lead to different levels of system support.<sup>7</sup>

[Table 4 about here]

I will first focus on the first model in Table 4 which includes all countries in the statistical analysis. The results of the first model provide support for my two hypotheses. The negative and statistically significant coefficient for the variable “perception of violence” suggests that when the respondents perceive more violence in their environment, they are less likely to support the political institutions of their country. The results show that the support for political institutions of individuals who have a low perception of crime is more than 3 percent higher than the system support of individuals who have a high perception of crime.

In the same vein, the negative and statistically significant coefficients for the variable measuring victimization indicate that respondents who have been victims of crimes are also less likely to express system support. Victimization leads to a decrease of 1.3 points in the system support

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<sup>7</sup> For ease of presentation, the estimates of the country dummies are not reported but the full model is available upon request from the author.

scale. In sum, violence negatively affects system support. Hence, the widespread increase of criminal violence in the region poses a serious threat to the quality of democracy in Latin America.

As for the control variables, the statistical model validates the main factors identified in the literature as determinants of system support. Unsurprisingly, a better evaluation of the economic and political performance of the government -both at the national and at the local level- increases the likelihood of system support. Attending party meetings has a positive impact on system support. However, electoral participation is not significantly associated with system support, suggesting that voting is a weaker predictor of political trust in Latin America than in other regions. Perception of corruption is negatively correlated with support for political institutions: a higher perception of corruption reduces the likelihood of expressing high system support. The positive and statistically significant coefficient of the variable “interpersonal trust” indicates that an increase in this factor increases the probability of system support. The coefficient for the variable “exposure to TV” does not reach standard levels of statistical significance. Hence, we cannot reject the null hypothesis that media consumption and support for political institutions are unrelated in Latin America. However, more research is needed to determine whether the *tone* of political coverage (i.e. media negativity) has an impact on system support. Finally, the model confirms that the demographic characteristics of the respondent have an impact on support for political institutions. Women, older and more educated citizens tend to express lower levels of system support.<sup>8</sup> However, the effect of age is not as strong as the one found by Booth and Seligson (2009). Citizens in the age groups 21-30 and 31-40 tend to have lower levels of political trust than citizens in the age group 16-20, but the effect disappears for older cohorts.

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<sup>8</sup> I measured age and education with a series of dummy variables. The excluded base groups in the regressions are the youngest age cohort (age group 16-20) and citizens without any formal education.

The use of the same scale for all the items makes it possible to compare the effect of different factors on political trust in Latin America. The evaluation of the performance of the government is clearly the best predictor of system support. But the two independent variables of interest (perception of violence and victimization) have an impact on support for political institutions that is comparable in size to many of the other variables privileged in the political behavior literature. The size of the coefficients measuring perception of violence and victimization is only slightly smaller than other variables that have been associated with political legitimacy in the region in previous research (interpersonal trust and perception of corruption). Moreover, exposure to violence has an even stronger impact on the probability of supporting political institutions when respondents are both victims of crime and have high perceptions of violence. Table 5 presents coefficients for the relationship between victimization and system support when perception of violence is at its minimum level (0), at its mean (41.5), and at its maximum level (100).<sup>9</sup>

[Table 5 about here]

A respondent that has been victimized is less likely to express system support, regardless of his perception of violence. However, the conditional effects clearly show that the negative effects of victimization and perception of violence reinforce each other. The negative impact of victimization on political trust is much higher when perception of violence is also high. In fact, a respondent that has the maximum level of perception of violence and has been victim of crime is likely to express a level of system support that is 4.7 points lower than an average respondent in the 100-point scale. This effect is similar in size to the impact of citizens' retrospective

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<sup>9</sup> The conditional effects were calculated using the "lincom" command in the statistical program Stata 11.0.



evaluations of the economy and larger than the effect of most of the other variables included in the model. Figure 1 illustrates this effect.

[Figure 1 about here]

Another purpose of this paper is to test whether the negative impact of criminal violence on political trust that some authors have found in three Central American countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) also holds in the rest of Latin America. In order to tackle this question, the second model in Table 2 excludes the most violent countries from the analysis. In the countries that remain in the analysis criminal violence has increased (see Table 1). But crime rates are still much lower than in the four countries that were excluded in the second model (Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). This model clearly shows that the negative impact of crime on system support is not a specificity of some very violent countries in Central America. In fact, in this model the coefficients for the variables “perception of violence” and “victimization” remain in the expected direction and are statistically significant. Interestingly, the size of the coefficients is larger in models 2 than in model 1, suggesting that exposure to violence may have even more detrimental effects on political trust in countries with moderate crime rates.

A tentative explanation of this phenomenon is that a moderate rise in criminal violence in countries with relatively low crime rates may be very visible and attract a lot of attention from the media, whereas a rise in criminal violence in countries that are already very violent may be comparatively less damaging for system support since citizens are used to directly experience crime and to be exposed to criminal violence through the media. Considering the figures in table 1 and the results of the current analysis, it is plausible that the rise in homicide rates from 13.4 to

18.4 in Ecuador between 1995 and 2006 has had a much more negative impact on system support than the rise from 51.2 to 63.8 experienced by El Salvador in the same period.

For ease of presentation, the estimates of the nine country dummies are not shown. In all but one case, the coefficients of the country dummy variables were statistically significant at  $p < 0.1$  in a two-tailed test. The sign and magnitude of the specific country coefficients are not, in and of themselves, of interest here but the results suggest that it is important to take contextual and institutional factors into account when explaining political support in the region.

Results for country fixed effects indicate that it is necessary to account for unique national circumstances when explaining system support in Latin America. Hence, in the four models below I introduce system-level factors to the regressions. In order to examine the effect of both system- and individual-level measures on political trust, I use the hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) technique.<sup>10</sup> As I only have ten countries in the study I can include only one system-level variable at a time in the HLM regressions.

The use of hierarchical models is particularly useful to estimate the impact of criminal violence on system support while also controlling for the modernization argument (Inglehart 2003), which cannot be measured at the individual level. Moreover, it allows me to use alternative measures of government effectiveness by using the Polity IV score and the World Bank government effectiveness index. Table 6 presents the HLM models predicting the level of system support in Latin America.

[Table 6 about here]

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<sup>10</sup> All HLM models in the paper are calculated with the XTMIXED command in Stata 11.0.

The main conclusion to be drawn from this second set of models is that the average level of political trust in Latin American countries is affected by economic and human development, as suggested by the modernization argument. Confidence in political institutions tends to be higher in more developed countries. The variables measuring socioeconomic development (human development indicator and GDP per capita) are both positive and statistically significant at the 5% level (two-tailed test). Government effectiveness and the consolidation of democracy also appear to increase the general level of political trust in Latin American countries. The Polity IV measure and the government effectiveness index are positively associated with system support, and both coefficients are statistically significant at the 1% level (two-tailed test).

It bears emphasis that controlling for these country-level variables does not affect the coefficients of the main independent variables in the models. Both “victimization” and “perception of violence” remain statistically significant in all the HLM models, and the size of the impact is fairly similar.

### **Discussion**

What are the reasons behind these results? Why do victimization and high perception of violence have a negative impact on support for political institutions? This discussion will be divided in two sub-sections. First, I will consider the direct effects of criminal violence on system support in Latin American countries. Second, I will analyze how criminal violence has an impact on the legitimacy of political institutions indirectly by affecting interpersonal trust.

#### **Direct Effects of Criminal Violence on System Support**

The first explanation of the link between crime and low system support is that the increasing levels of criminal violence in Latin America make blatantly clear the *inefficiency of state*

*institutions* to provide security to its citizens. The crime rates have been on the rise everywhere in Latin America for the last twenty years, which makes it the most violent region in the world.<sup>11</sup> The political institutions in the fragile Latin American democracies have been incapable of dealing effectively with this issue. Latin American citizens may stop supporting the political system of their countries when they perceive that the state is unable to protect them from violence and crime, which constitutes a clear rupture of the Hobbesian pact. The problem is aggravated by the mediatization of the problem and the instrumentalization of the issue by politicians, which have the effect of exaggeratedly increasing the perception of violence of Latin American citizens.

The second reason that may explain why victimization and high perception of violence are negatively correlated with system support is the *inefficiency of the judicial systems* in Latin America. As already mentioned, very few homicides in the region are subjected to a judicial process (Estévez 2003; Manrique 2006). The record is even worst for less serious crimes. This inefficiency leads to a generalized impunity which is negatively perceived by Latin American citizens, especially by those who have suffered from a violent crime and seek redress. Hence, it is possible that victimization has a negative impact on system support because citizens victimized are disappointed with the response provided by judicial institutions. In a recent contribution, Malone (2010) demonstrates this effect in Central American countries. She shows that “crime control performance is significantly linked to diffuse support for the justice system as a whole” (Malone 2010: 122). Citizens that perceive that the neighborhood in which they live is violent have lower levels of trust for the justice system of their countries, and are less likely to

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<sup>11</sup> Sub-Saharan Africa is also an extremely violent region. But the violence that plagues that region is more closely related to civil conflicts than to criminal violence.

believe that the national courts guarantee a fair trial (see also Herrmann, MacDonald, and Tauscher 2011).<sup>12</sup>

### Indirect Effects of Criminal Violence on System Support: the Impact of Crime on Interpersonal Trust

The third reason that may explain the negative effects of victimization and perception of violence on the probability of expressing system support is that *criminal violence may lead to a decrease in interpersonal trust*. Being part of a social network and having high levels of interpersonal trust are factors that the literature has identified as determinant of system support (Brehm and Rahm 1997; Power and Clark 2001). Putnam (1993) argues that interpersonal trust allows individuals to participate in civic associations, which in turn is key for citizens to develop confidence on the political institutions of their country. My statistical model supports this claim, since the coefficient for the variable “Interpersonal Trust” in Table 2 is positive and statistically significant. Higher levels of interpersonal trust increase the likelihood of expressing system support. In communities where violence is widespread, individuals may respond by abandoning public spaces where the risk of suffering a violent attack is higher. Participation in social and community activities decreases, as individuals become more attached to their private spheres. The “social capital” of Latin American citizens shrinks accordingly (Cruz 2000). Moreover, high perceptions of violence lead to interpersonal distrust because in highly violent environments,

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<sup>12</sup> I replicated Malone’s analysis with the database used in this paper and found very similar results. Exposure to violence (i.e. victimization and fear of violence) appears to erode support for the judicial system in the ten Latin American countries included in this analysis. The results of this model are not reported here but are available in an online appendix.

attitudes of confidence and reciprocity are substituted by attitudes of distrust and fear, and people tend to rely on their own resources, rather than engaging in social networks (Ayres 1998).

### **Conclusion**

The existing literature on system support has paid scant attention to the effects of violence on political trust. This paper has shown that criminal violence has a negative impact on system support in Latin America. Both victimization and high perception of violence decrease the likelihood of supporting political institutions. This is an important finding and can have implications at the aggregate level because of the skyrocketing criminal violence in Latin America.

This paper advances three explanations for this correlation. First, Latin American citizens become disenchanted with a political system that is unable to respond efficiently in one of their main areas of concern (public security). Second, individuals who are victims of violence or who perceive violence to be high are dissatisfied with judicial systems that fail to punish those responsible for the increasing levels of violence. Third, exposure to criminal violence has a negative impact on interpersonal trust which in turn negatively affects system support.

The findings of this paper have serious implications for the quality and the stability of democracy in Latin America. One of the pillars of democratization in Latin America is the acquisition of a democratic political culture by the citizens of the newly created and fragile democracies of the region. The acceptance of the existing political institutions as the more adequate for the country is essential for the stability of democratic regimes. Political legitimacy is the result of citizens' satisfaction with the performance of political institutions in some key

areas (Diamond 1993; Lipset 1994; Cruz 2003). Insecurity was neglected in the literature on political legitimacy, while the performance of institutions in other areas (mainly the economy) has received much more attention. The results of this study suggest that rising levels of criminal violence may also have a negative impact on the democratic political culture in Latin America, undermining then one of the building blocks of democratization in the region.

The negative impact of perception of violence and victimization on system support may have deleterious consequences for democratic stability in another important way. Discontent with the performance of political institutions to combat insecurity may lead disenchanted Latin American citizens to support extra-legal, quasi-authoritarian means to recreate order. This may lead to the emergence of “brown areas” where the democratic rule of law is not respected (O'Donnell 1993; Méndez et al. 1999). One of the big advances of democratization in Latin America has been the emergence of truly civilian governments and the return of the armed forces to the barracks.

However, in the last ten years the military has been used in some Latin American countries to fight against criminal groups and to restore order in extreme circumstances. The armed forces are sometimes used in Brazil to conduct police operations in the *favelas*, and they are currently engaged in a Drugs War against organized criminal groups in some areas in Mexico. This use of the military for police purposes is made possible by the disenchantment of Latin American citizens with other state institutions that have not responded adequately. In the same vein, the well documented abuses and killings by the police in some Latin American countries –especially Brazil– are related to the lack of response evidenced by political institutions. Hence, urban masses in cities like Buenos Aires, São Paulo, and Salvador often end up accepting the necessity of illegal means by the police to fight against the increasing levels of violent crime (Brinks 2008).

This paper opens interesting avenues for further research. First, it would be interesting to test if exposure to violence also leads Latin American citizens to be less attached to democratic values. If individuals who suffer from violence have lower levels of system support it follows that they could be more likely to support extra-legal or authoritarian solutions to restore order, especially when they live in areas where violence is out-of-control. LAPOP surveys include questions about attachment to civil rights and liberties, and ask respondents if they would support authoritarian regimes under certain circumstances (e.g. an increase in criminal activity). It is then possible to test if the decrease in system support provoked by the increase in violence also affects negatively the democratic political culture of Latin American citizens.

But my findings also have implications outside Latin America. This region is not the only one where violence is widespread. My design could be replicated with data from African countries to assess if violence (not necessarily criminal) also has a negative impact in that region. Moreover, even if violence is not as pervasive in the more developed and institutionalized Western democracies every major urban center has neighborhoods that are affected by criminal violence. It would be worth testing if victimization and high perception of violence also lead to lower levels of system support among citizens in these areas in developed democracies. This could further our understanding of violent demonstrations in these neighborhoods since it has been demonstrated that low levels of system support can trigger violent political behaviors.



**Table 1.** Homicide Rates in Latin America, 1995-2006

<b>Country</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>Percent Change</b>
Argentina	4.2	5	19.0
Brazil	25.7	29.2	13.6
Chile	3.2	5.8	81.3
Costa Rica	5.2	8	53.8
Ecuador	13.4	18.4	37.3
El Salvador	51.2	63.8	24.6
Guatemala	19.7	27.5	39.6
Mexico	18.4	11.2	-39.1
Nicaragua	11.7	17.5	49.6
Panama	9.4	12.4	31.9
Paraguay	18.6	16.1	-13.4
Peru	5.5	2.9	-47.3
Uruguay	4.7	4.7	0.0
Venezuela	14.8	31.9	115.5
Average	14.7	18.2	26.2
<p>Source: PAHO (Panamerican Health Organization) Online Statistics.</p>			

**Table 2.** Variables Measuring Support for Regime Institutions

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Survey Items
All of the following are on a 7-point scale, transformed to 1-100 range:
1. How much do you respect the political institutions of _____?
2. How proud do you feel to live under the _____ political system?
3. How much do you think one should support the _____ political system?

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**Table 3.** Variables Measuring Exposure to Violence

Survey Items
1. Speaking of the place or neighborhood where you live and thinking of the possibility of being a victim of assault or robbery...do you feel very safe, more or less safe, somewhat unsafe or very unsafe? (recoded into very unsafe = 0...very safe = 100)
2. Have you been a victim of physical violence or of some crime in the past 12 months? (1) Yes (0) No

**Table 4.** Ordered Logistic Regressions. Determinants of System Support in Latin America, 2004

	(1) OLS with robust SE (full model)	(2) OLS with robust SE (most violent countries excluded)
<i>Crime-Related Variables</i>		
Perception of Violence	-.033*** (.006)	-.038*** (.008)
Victim of Crime	-1.386*** (.524)	-1.477** (.603)
<i>Control Variables</i>		
Political Performance	.187*** (.010)	.163*** (.012)
Economic Performance	.083*** (.010)	.088*** (.012)
Political Participation (Attending Party Meetings)	.061*** (.009)	.074*** (.010)
Political Participation (Voting)	.786 (.501)	.264 (.596)
Perception of Corruption	-.044*** (.007)	-.052*** (.008)
Local Government Performance	.091*** (.010)	.095*** (.011)
Interpersonal Trust	.051*** (.007)	.049*** (.008)
Exposure to TV	.002 (.006)	-.007 (.007)
Women	-1.032** (.403)	-.945** (.457)
Primary Education	-2.395** (1.076)	-1.998 (1.439)
Secondary Education	-2.140* (1.101)	-2.226 (1.464)
College Education	-2.431** (1.153)	-1.597 (1.498)
Age 21-30	-1.488** (.713)	-.837 (.853)
Age 31-40	-1.259* (.754)	-.827 (.898)
Age 41-50	-.805 (.805)	-.539 (.943)
Age 51-60	-.465 (.878)	.538 (1.026)
Age 61 and older	-.358 (.950)	1.104 (1.107)
Constant	46.45*** (1.678)	47.88*** (2.078)
Observations	13,903	9,943
R-squared	0.178	0.195

**Table 5.** Conditional Coefficients of Victimization at Various Levels of Perception of Violence

Level of Perception of Violence	Conditional Coefficient of Victimization (Violent Crime)
0	-1.386*** (.523)
41.5	-2.765*** (.562)
100	-4.711*** (.788)

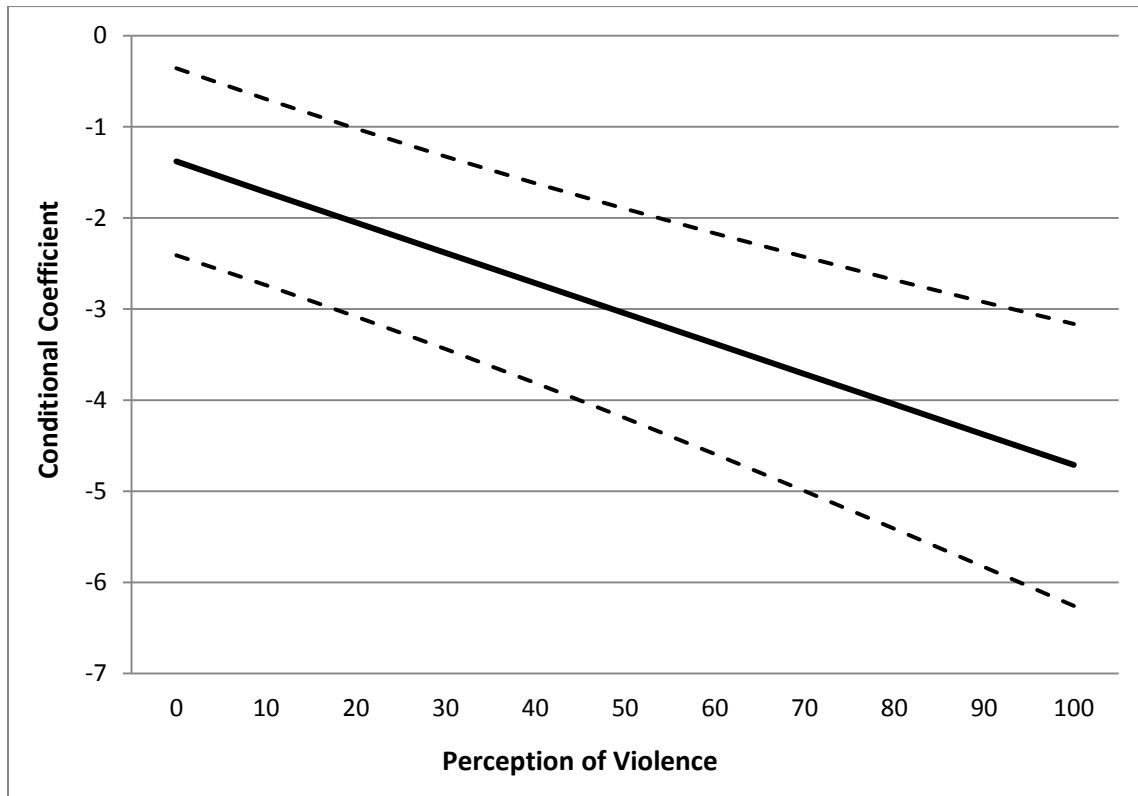
\*p<.1; \*\*p<.05; \*\*\*p<.01 (two-tailed test)

**Table 6.** HLM Regressions. Determinants of System Support in Latin America, 2004

VARIABLES	(1) HLM Model	(2) HLM Model	(3) HLM Model	(4) HLM Model
<i>Individual-Level Variables</i>				
Perception of Violence	-.033*** (.006)	-.033*** (.006)	-.033*** (.006)	-.033*** (.006)
Victim of Crime	-1.384*** (.509)	-1.383*** (.511)	-1.293** (.511)	-1.425*** (.502)
Political Performance	.187*** (.010)	.187*** (.010)	.187*** (.010)	.187*** (.010)
Economic Performance	.083*** (.010)	.083*** (.010)	.083*** (.010)	.083*** (.010)
Political Participation (Attending Party Meetings)	.061*** (.008)	.061*** (.008)	.061*** (.008)	.060*** (.008)
Political Participation (Voting)	.775 (.495)	.781 (.495)	.778 (.495)	.791 (.495)
Perception of Corruption	-.044*** (.007)	-.044*** (.007)	-.044*** (.007)	-.044*** (.007)
Local Government Performance	.091*** (.009)	.091*** (.009)	.091*** (.009)	.092*** (.009)
Interpersonal Trust	.051*** (.006)	.051*** (.006)	.051*** (.006)	.051*** (.006)
Exposure to TV	.002 (.006)	.002 (.006)	.002 (.006)	.002 (.006)
Women	-1.025** (.402)	-1.030** (.402)	-1.053*** (.402)	-1.023** (.401)
Primary Education	-2.420** (1.027)	-2.407** (1.027)	-2.391** (1.027)	-2.423** (1.027)
Secondary Education	-2.185** (1.061)	-2.162** (1.061)	-2.134** (1.061)	-2.197** (1.060)
College Education	-2.482** (1.119)	-2.456** (1.119)	-2.441** (1.119)	-2.495** (1.118)
Age 21-30	-1.492** (.719)	-1.490** (.719)	-1.478** (.719)	-1.505** (.719)
Age 31-40	-1.271* (.758)	-1.267* (.758)	-1.249* (.758)	-1.289* (.757)
Age 41-50	-.817 (.807)	-.810 (.807)	-.791 (.807)	-.830 (.807)
Age 51-60	-.483 (.882)	-.475 (.882)	-.449 (.882)	-.504 (.882)
Age 61 and older	-.378 (.945)	-.362 (.945)	-.339 (.945)	-.400 (.944)
<i>System-Level Variables</i>				
Human Development Indicator	.831*** (26.02)			
GDP per Capita (logged)		20.26** (8.886)		
Level of Democracy			4.152*** (1.589)	
Government Effectiveness				.396*** (.066)
Constant	-15.74 (18.28)	-27.49 (31.85)	12.55 (12.60)	27.70*** (3.36)
Observations	13,903	13,903	13,903	13,903
Number of groups	10	10	10	10

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p&lt;0.01, \*\* p&lt;0.05, \* p&lt;0.1

**Figure 1.** Conditional Effect of Victimization and Perception of Violence on System Support

## Appendix 1. Operationalization of Independent Variables (LAPOP Surveys, 2004)

Variables	Survey Items
Political Performance	Speaking generally of the current government would you say that the job the current president is doing is very good, good, average, bad, or very bad? (recoded into very bad = 0...very good = 100)
Economic Performance	In general how would categorize the economic situation of the country? Would you say it is very good, good, average, bad, or very bad? (recoded into very bad = 0...very good = 100)
Political Participation (Attending Party Meetings)	Please tell me if you attend political party meetings at least once a week, one or two times a month, once or twice a year or never? (recoded into never = 0...at least once a week = 100)
Political Participation (Voting)	Did you vote in the last Presidential elections of 2002? (1) Yes (0) No
Perception of Corruption	Taking into account your experience or what you have heard, is corruption among public officials very common, common, not very common, or uncommon? (recoded into uncommon = 0...very common = 100)
Local Government Performance	Would you say that the services the Municipality is providing are excellent, good, average, poor, or awful? (recoded into awful = 0...excellent = 100)
Interpersonal Trust	Now, speaking in general terms of the people from here, would you say that people in this neighborhood are generally: very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy, or untrustworthy? (recoded into untrustworthy = 0... very trustworthy = 100)
Exposure to TV	With what frequency do you watch news on TV: every day, once or twice a week, rarely, or never? (recoded into never = 0... every day = 100)



## Appendix 2. Descriptive Statistics (Country Averages)

	System Support Index	Victimization	Perception of Violence	Political Performance	Retrospective Economic Evaluation	Perception of Corruption	Attending Party Meetings	Voting	Local Government Performance	Interpersonal Trust	Exposure to TV
<b>Bolivia</b>	49.91	24.50%	47.5	54.1	35.3	67.4	18.5	75.4%	45.9	48.4	81.2
<b>Colombia</b>	62.8	14.40%	40.5	70.3	38.7	73.5	11.8	66.9%	57.5	64.1	84.6
<b>Costa Rica</b>	75.2	15.20%	42.2	54.1	39.8	74.6	2.8	74.3%	52.8	70.9	85.6
<b>Ecuador</b>	46.2	14.90%	39.9	42.9	31.3	79.4	3.6	87.4%	55.4	58.2	82.8
<b>El Salvador</b>	65.8	17.10%	43.6	61.1	36.9	65.8	5.3	75.6%	57.2	63.1	76.3
<b>Guatemala</b>	53.4	12.10%	45.8	57.4	29.7	70.8	7.3	64.5%	51.9	57.2	59.5
<b>Honduras</b>	54.6	13.60%	15.9	46.1	27.8	69.4	8.7	72.9%	52.1	63.2	59.6
<b>Mexico</b>	61.5	17.20%	40.8	53.5	34.8	73.1	6.9	75.6%	49.5	58.1	81.6
<b>Nicaragua</b>	53.7	15.20%	45.3	50.1	27.8	72.1	11.2	75.3%	50.2	56.1	57.4
<b>Panama</b>	56.7	14.80%	47.2	40.9	33.9	73.8	17.4	76.1%	46.8	52.9	78.4
<b>Mean</b>	57.9	15.90%	40.9	53.1	33.6	72.0	9.4	74.4	51.9	59.2	74.7
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	8.1	3.20%	8.3	7.9	3.9	3.5	4.9	5.6	3.6	5.8	10.2

Source: LAPOP (2004)

**Appendix 3. Descriptive Statistics (System-Level Measures)**

	<b>Human Development Index</b>	<b>GDP Per Capita</b>	<b>World Bank Government Effectiveness Index</b>	<b>Polity IV Score</b>
Bolivia	0.68	2572	33.5	8
Colombia	0.77	5395	54.4	7
Costa Rica	0.83	6680	68.0	10
Ecuador	0.74	3561	20.4	6
El Salvador	0.72	2732	50.0	7
Guatemala	0.65	4035	31.1	8
Honduras	0.67	2025	34.5	7
Mexico	0.80	7357	63.1	8
Nicaragua	0.67	1923	26.7	8
Panama	0.79	5869	57.3	9
Mean	0.73	4214	43.9	7.8
Standard Deviation	0.06	1796	15.0	1

*Source:* UNDP report (2004), Madison (2010), World Bank, Marshall et al. (2008)

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