

Does Crime Undermine Public Support for Democracy? Evidence from Central America and Mexico

Mary Fran T. Malone
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
University of New Hampshire
314 Horton Science Center
20 Academic Way
Durham, NH 03824
Mary.Malone@unh.edu

Abstract

The current crime crisis in Mexico and Central America has captured domestic and international headlines. The region is now infamous for some of the highest homicide rates in the world. In addition to high rates of violent crime, organized crime has also emerged as a powerful challenge to public security. As police and military forces confront suspected criminals and even armed drug cartels, many have feared that this escalating conflict might undermine the relatively recent transitions to democracy. Indeed, there is considerable theoretical and empirical evidence to lend credence to such concerns. New democracies frequently do not have sufficient time to develop their institutional capacities to fight crime, and can find themselves weak and ineffective when trying to maintain order. Furthermore, recent studies have linked public fear of crime to support for undemocratic alternatives, such as extra-legal justice. This paper aims to assess the impact of crime on Mexican and Central American democracy empirically. Building upon the burgeoning literature on crime and democracy, this analysis examines the impact of crime on citizens' attitudes toward democracy and their political participation. In doing so, this project aims to assess the impact of personal victimization and fear of crime on citizens' political attitudes (support for the rule of law) and behavior (voting and community participation).

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Does Crime Undermine Public Support for Democracy? Evidence from Central America

“What is at stake today is not just the result of an election, but rather the future of democracy, of representative institutions,” announced Mexican President Felipe Calderón shortly before midterm elections in July of 2009. Declaring that Mexico was at an “historical crossroads,” President Calderón cautioned that the future of democracy depended quite heavily on the outcome of his government’s fight against organized crime and corruption. Calderón’s concern has echoed throughout Mexico and Central America, as crime increasingly monopolizes public discourse. While the global economic crisis has exacerbated historic problems of poverty and inequality, national attention has increasingly focused on crime. In some countries, crime has even replaced civil war as the key detriment to citizens’ security (Godoy 2002; Pérez 2003; Seligson 2005). When asked to identify the most serious challenge facing their countries, citizens place crime at the top of the list in Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Panama.¹ In Mexico and El Salvador, public concern over crime was on par with that for economic issues; only in Nicaragua was crime overshadowed by concerns about the economy, unemployment and poverty.²

The current crime wave highlights a question of growing importance throughout the developing world – what impact does crime have on democracy? To begin to answer this question, this study examines the effects of crime on democracy in Central America and Mexico, focusing on the micro level political consequences of crime. To this end, this paper utilizes data gathered by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in national surveys in 2008. For over three decades, LAPOP has conducted interviews to gauge political attitudes and behaviors throughout the Latin American region. Most importantly for this analysis, the LAPOP surveys contain numerous questions measuring experiences with and perceptions of crime. Thus, these data are a particularly valuable resource for examining the linkages between crime and political attitudes and behavior.

The countries of Central America and Mexico are uniquely suited for examining the impact of crime on political attitudes and behavior. While these countries share some historical and socio-economic challenges, they vary considerably in terms of political development. Costa Rica has long boasted a stable democratic tradition. The end of the Cold War ushered in widespread democratization throughout the rest of Central America; however the manner of this transition varied considerably. Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua negotiated with insurgents to end violent conflicts, and incorporated former combatants into competitive

¹ In Guatemala, 40% of respondents indicated that crime was the most serious problem facing the country. In Honduras 36% of those surveyed echoed this response, compared to 42% in Costa Rica and 27% in Panama. Survey results are based upon the 2008 Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) surveys of Vanderbilt University. LAPOP receives support from the United States Agency for International Development, the United Nations Development Program, and the Inter-American Development Bank. This 2008 survey consisted of personal interviews with 10,745 respondents, averaging 45 minutes in length. Online data analysis and reports using LAPOP survey data are available at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/> (last accessed August 5, 2009).

² In Mexico, 16% of respondents stated that crime was the most serious problem, compared to 17% percent that named the economic crisis, and an additional 17% that identified unemployment. In El Salvador, 32% of respondents ranked economic problems as most important, and 31% identified crime. Nicaraguans ranked crime at the very bottom of the list, as only 3% of respondents indicated that crime was the most serious problem.

democratic processes. In the cases of Guatemala and El Salvador, power transitioned from a right wing dictatorship to democracy. In Nicaragua, the left wing Sandinistas ceded power to a newly elected democratic government. Honduras' right wing military junta also relinquished power during this time, while the 1989 US invasion of Panama resulted in the overthrow of dictatorship and eventual democratization. Mexican democratization was more gradual, beginning at the subnational level during the late 1980s and gaining speed as the PRI's historic monopolization of political power steadily weakened throughout the 1990s as it lost its dominance in the national legislature as well as in state and local governments. In 2000, the election of opposition candidate Vicente Fox to the presidency clearly ended seven decades of PRI hegemony, ushering in an era of democratic electoral competition. This variation in political development allows for the examination of crime and democracy in seven distinct national settings. Such variation enriches micro level analyses, as it allows researchers to assess whether the linkages between respondents' experiences and perceptions of crime and political attitudes and behavior are conditioned by national context.

To examine the micro level consequences of crime for democracy in these countries, this study proceeds in four parts. The first section provides an overview of crime trends in Central America and Mexico during the period of democratization. Following this background, the second portion of the paper turns to examine the literature on crime and democracy. With this theoretical framework, the third section relies upon statistical analysis to gauge the impact of crime on citizens' political attitudes (support for the rule of law) and political behavior (voting behavior and community participation). The concluding section of the paper discusses the implications of the analysis for political attitudes and behavior in Mexico and Central America.

Overview of Crime Crisis in Latin America

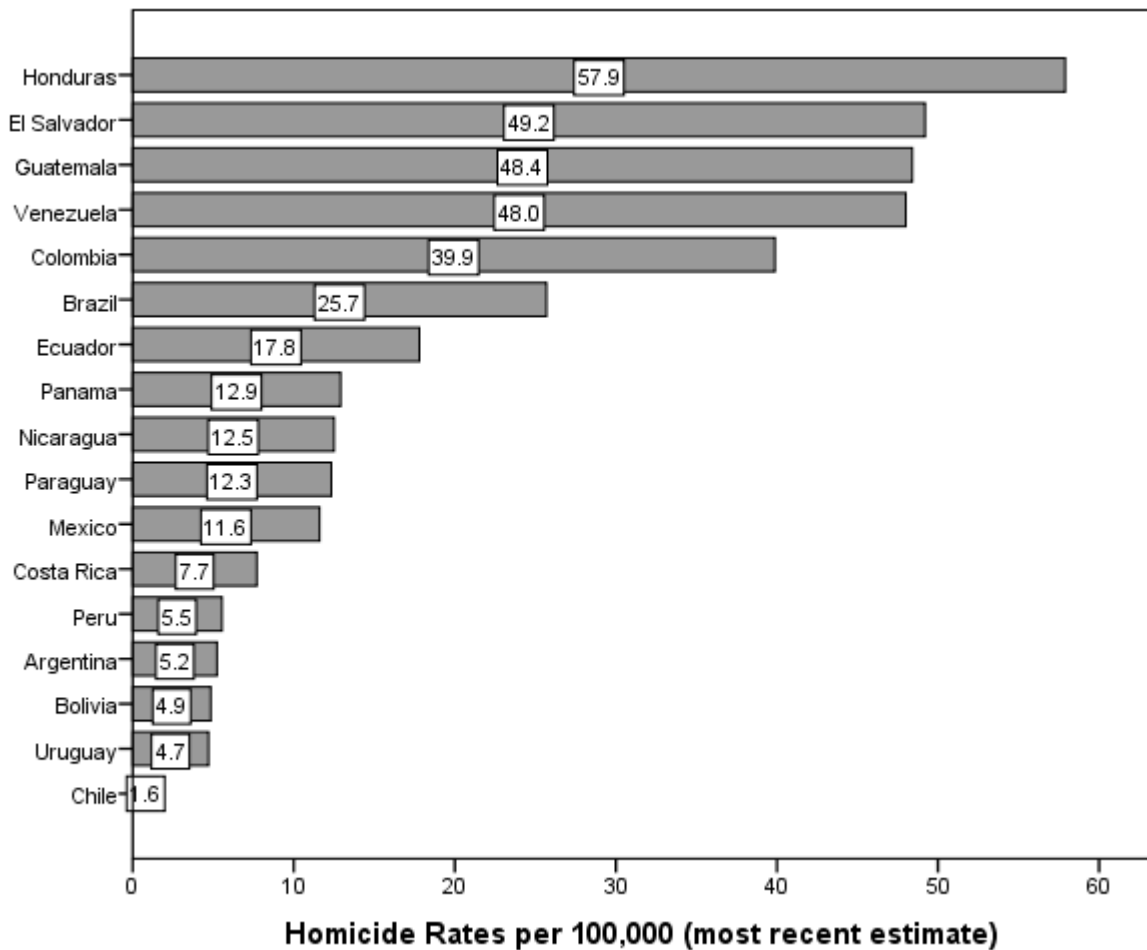
Euphoria over the democratization of Latin America quickly turned tentative as elections coincided with skyrocketing crime rates. As most Latin American nations made the twin transitions to neoliberal economies and democratic forms of governance throughout the 1980s and 1990s, they were plagued with rising crime rates, particularly violent crimes like homicides. Cruz (2008) notes that during this time, the homicide rate alone increased by 50% in the region. Initially Mexico was a refreshing exception to this trend, as the late 1990s and early 2000s were marked by a declining homicide rate (Bailey and Flores-Macías 2007). This reprieve was short-lived, however, once the Mexican government decided to pursue drug cartels more aggressively. Homicide rates in Mexico declined steadily from 1992 through 2008, but then registered a decisive increase in 2008.³

Not only have crime rates themselves risen throughout the region, as measured by national homicide rates, but under new democratic regimes crimes feature prominently in media with less fear of censorship (Oviedo, 2000; Seligson and Azpuru 2001; Perez 2003; Seligson

³ While national rates of homicide declined steadily until 2008, there was substantial sub-national variation in these trends. For an examination of subnational homicide rates over time, see: www.seguridadpublicaenmexico.org.mx/Homicidio/homic.htm (last accessed July 22, 2009).

2005; Bailey and Taylor 2009).⁴ Many worried that the fledgling democracies would not be able to withstand spiraling crime rates, and initial successes would collapse under the weight of criminality (United Nations 2005). Figure 1 illustrates how critical the problem of crime is currently, particularly in Central America, home to some of the highest homicide rates in the world.

Figure 1: Homicide Rates per 100,000 (Most Recent Estimate)⁵



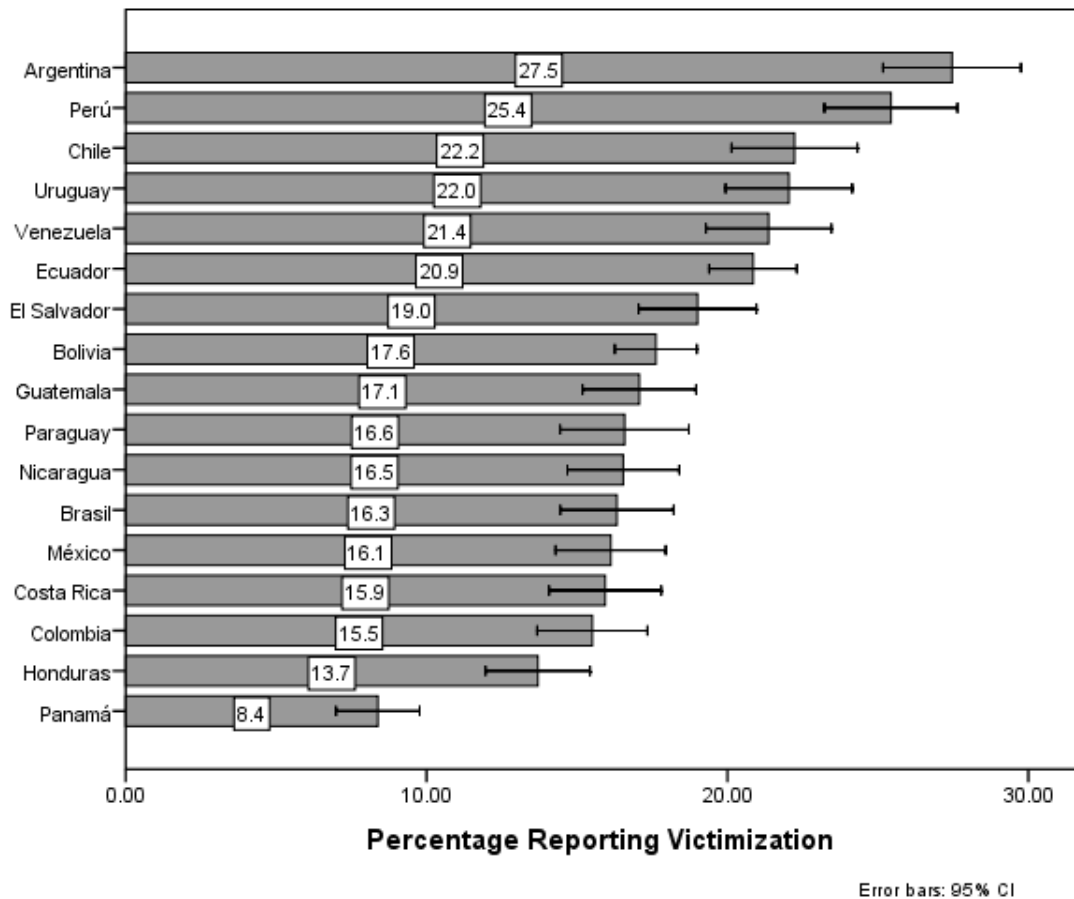
Homicide rates tend to be used most frequently in cross-national comparisons of crime rates, as despite their well-documented flaws, they do tend to be the most valid measure of a phenomenon that is difficult to measure cross-nationally. Differences in definitions of crime, crime-reporting rates, and data collection make national reports on other types of crime difficult to compare country to country. Still, a strict reliance on homicide rates can mask problems with other types of crime, such as burglary, robbery, and assault. To examine levels of these forms of less violent crime, victimization surveys can be helpful. Of course, victimization surveys

⁴ Given the difficulties of gathering reliable crime data, comparative scholars tend to rely upon homicide rates, as homicides tend not to have the same problem with under-reporting, and can be more easily compared cross-nationally than other crimes, where legal definitions may vary (Lafree and Tseloni 2006).

⁵ The Appendix lists the years and sources for the homicide data.

themselves can also be problematic, as respondents might self-report crimes outside the specified time range, or might dismiss crimes if they think of them as unimportant (Bergman 2006). In the context of Latin America, perhaps the most serious problem with victimization surveys is the fact that such measures “tend to over-report crimes against property and underreport violence,” which can pose credibility problems for cross-sectional research (Bergman 2006: 221). Despite these recognized limitations, victimization surveys do provide valuable insight into respondents’ self-reported experiences with less violent types of crime, provided such data are used to document general trends as opposed to absolute rates of victimization.

Figure 2: Self-Reported Victimization Rates (LAPOP 2008)



Self-reported victimization rates indicate that the countries considered “safe” according to national homicide rates have been plagued by other, less violent types of crime. For example, Costa Rica has the lowest homicide rate in Central America, yet self-reported victimization rates are statistically no different from those of Mexico. When examining these rates, it is important to keep in mind Bergman’s (2006) caution that victimization surveys tend to over-report property crimes; indeed, the countries with the highest rates of self-reported victimization also tend to have higher levels of economic development in the region. Victimization surveys are more

useful to gauge overall trends rather than absolute measures of the occurrence of crime. The victimization rates in Figure 2 should not be used to infer that victimization in Costa Rica is significantly higher than that of Panama, but rather that Costa Ricans have reported problems with crime that are not captured by national homicide rates. Self-reported victimization rates indicate that while some countries are considered safe due to low homicide rates, they still face challenges posed by less violent types of crime.

In addition to delineating between homicide rates and less violent types of crime, it is also important to specify the countries that have faced challenges from organized crime. Bailey and Taylor (2008) highlight the distinction between organized and non-organized crimes, providing a comparative analysis of organized crime's confrontation with state forces in Brazil and Mexico, and discussing the impact of organized crime on state monopolization of force and legitimacy. The nations of Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have faced challenges from organized crime and gangs, thus the nature of their crime crisis is distinct.

In addition to variations in terms of crime, these countries also vary in terms of institutional performance. One way to gauge the quality of Latin American justice systems is through Freedom House rankings of the rule of law.⁶ According to Freedom House measures, some countries (i.e., Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Chile) have justice institutions that perform on par with countries in Europe and the United States. Such levels of performance are not the norm, however, as most Latin American nations fall far short of this mark. For example, experts ranked Guatemala far below the global average in terms of the quality of its justice system.

Figure 3 aims to group the Latin American countries according to their levels of violent crime and quality of their justice systems. To put Latin American nations in a global context, Figure 3 utilizes markers based on other global regions. The solid red vertical reference line indicates the average Freedom House rule of law score for the countries of the European Union and the United States (13.6). The dotted purple line marks the point at which the United Nations considers homicide rates to be a threat for democratic stability, 11.0 homicides per 100,000. As Figure 3 illustrates, Latin American countries can be grouped into three categories. First, there are three countries with Freedom House scores either above the E.U./US average, or close to it – Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Chile. These countries also boast low rates of violent crime. In the second group are countries that have justice institutions of questionable quality, but register low levels of violent crime (Bolivia, Peru, Argentina, Paraguay, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama).⁷ The quality of justice is low in this group, but these countries do not face the stiff challenges posed by skyrocketing homicide rates. It is important to note that while homicide rates on average are lower in this group, there is tremendous subnational variation. Mexico is the most glaring example of this subnational variation, as the government crackdown on organized crime has led to a dramatic escalation of violent crime in some regions. In the last category are

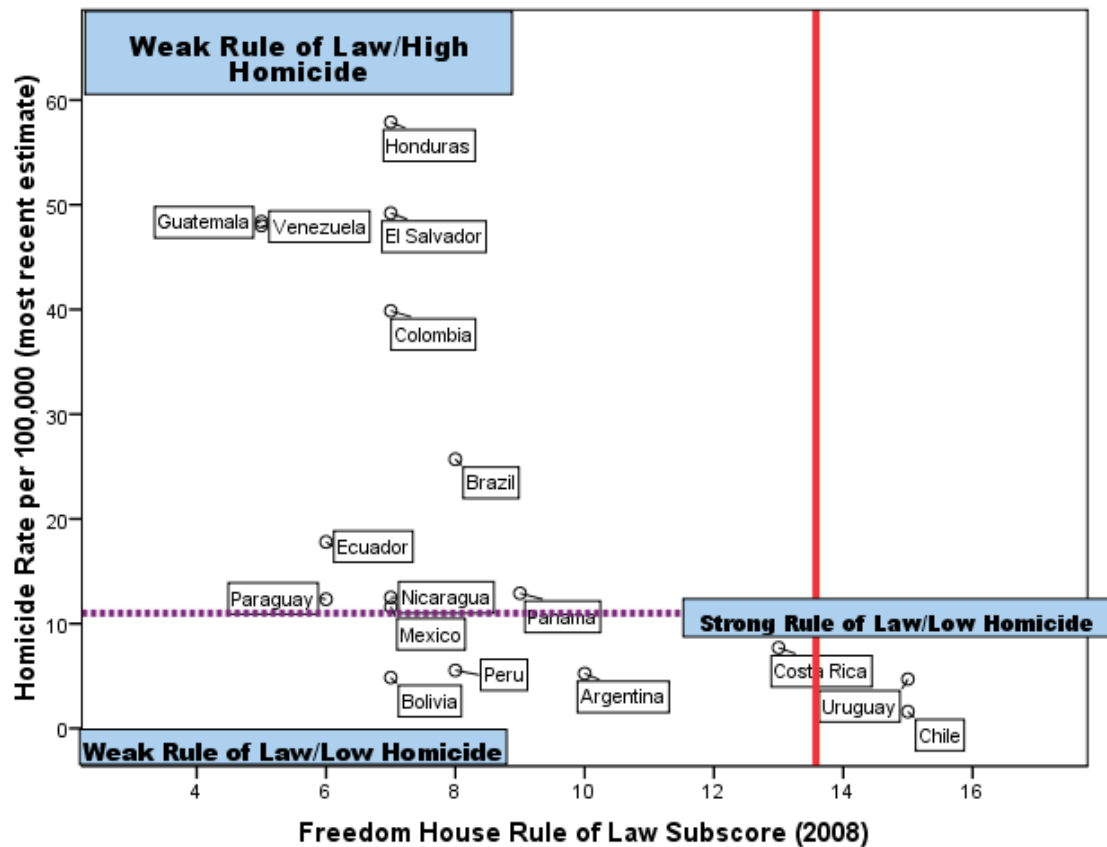
⁶ The Freedom House Organization ranks countries on their abilities to uphold the rule of law, ranging from a low of zero to a high of sixteen. For more information on the criteria used to determine country rankings, see http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=351&ana_page=341&year=2008 (last accessed August 26, 2008).

⁷ In this second group, some countries are slightly higher than the UN threshold for homicide rates and democratic stability, but are substantially lower than countries like Honduras and El Salvador, with their alarmingly high murder rates. These countries are grouped in terms of their proximity to the UN threshold; this characterization recognizes that countries like Panama and Nicaragua have homicide rates closer to Peru than their Central American neighbors.

countries with high levels of violent crime and low levels of the rule of law. This group faces the twin challenges of poor institutions and high murder rates.

Figure 3 does not aim to provide a definitive score for individual countries, but rather to group the countries loosely in terms of their problems with violent crime and justice system performance. By grouping countries according to these two dimensions, Figure 3 lays the groundwork for the empirical analysis, which will identify the determinants of fear of crime individually in each country. The classification of individual countries into these groups illuminates national level variations, and facilitates the examination of the effects of crime on support for the rule of law in three different types of national contexts.

Figure 3: Country Groupings by Crime Rate and Rule of Law⁸



The red reference line marks the average rule of law score for the United States and members of the E.U. The dotted purple line notes the point at which homicide rates can jeopardize democratic stability according to the UN.

These country level variations allow for the micro level examination of crime and democracy in very different national contexts. One might expect victimization and fear of crime to have a stronger impact on democracy in countries where the crime epidemic is more serious –

⁸ The Freedom House Organization ranks countries on their abilities to uphold the rule of law, ranging from a low of zero to a high of sixteen. For more information on the criteria used to determine country rankings, see http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=351&ana_page=341&year=2008 (last accessed August 26, 2008).

i.e., Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. However, recent scholarship gives pause to such assumptions. In a comparative study of the United States and eighteen European countries, Blumstein (2007) finds that citizens' attitudes fluctuate quite differently. He observes citizens are more likely to exhibit a preference for highly punitive enforcement measures when crime rates are low. In the case of the US, Blumstein points to the politicization of crime, as politicians have found they can cash in on "tough on crime" rhetoric during electoral cycles, even if crime rates themselves are falling. Politicians sound the alarm on growing criminality, leading citizens to think of common crime as more of a threat than objective crime rates would indicate. Indeed, countries with the lowest rates of crime sometimes exhibit the sharpest increases in punitiveness. Blumstein argues that as "politicians in other democracies see the success of the 'tough on crime' rhetorical stance, it seems reasonable that they would be tempted to follow similar patterns" (Blumstein 2007, 12). While Blumstein's dependent variable is punitiveness, it is easy to see how his work could inform this study. In countries with objectively low crime rates, the sensationalization and politicization of crime could lead citizens to overreact to crime, and have an effect on political attitudes and behavior. Also, citizens in relatively safe countries might not judge their status quo relative to that of other countries, even close neighbors. Rather, they might evaluate the current security situation in terms of past experiences or historic trends. Thus, even though crime rates in Costa Rica are low and institutional performance is above the regional average, citizens might still react strongly to perceived and/or hyped increases in criminality.

The Linkage between Crime and Democracy

It is clear that Central America and Mexico currently confront a crime crisis. In many cases the crime epidemic is exacerbated by weak deterrence institutions, which in some cases are currently buttressed by military involvement. What is unclear is the impact of these factors on democracy. Observers have warned that the crime epidemic could undermine democracy in the region, but to date empirical assessments of the relationship between crime and democratization have been limited, particularly at the micro level. This section reviews the burgeoning literature on the theoretical linkage between crime and democracy, setting the groundwork for an empirical examination of this relationship at the micro level.

Increasingly, scholars have focused on the relationship between crime and democracy, particularly as escalating crime rates have overwhelmed democracies in the developing world (Bergman and Whitehead 2009). This literature is relatively new, however. Prior to the 1990s, scholars focused extensively on the relationship between economic performance and democratic legitimacy, as many worried that democracy might prove fragile if it did not usher in strong economic performance and rising standards of living. Until recently, scholars tended to overlook the importance of regime performance in the area of public security. Diamond (1999) cautions against such a myopic examination of regime performance, noting that:

Effective government and regime performance is most often thought of in economic terms. But it is not only material progress and security that democratic citizens value. They are no less concerned with their physical safety and security, which require protection from arbitrary harm by the state or criminal elements (Diamond 1999).

Whitehead (2002) also points to the need to scrutinize public security in nascent democracies, identifying citizen security as a “major, but under-theorized, component of most processes of democratization” (Whitehead 2002: 171). Whitehead notes that in the absence of such a basic condition as public security, “neither citizenship nor democracy can be regarded as secure” (Whitehead 2002: 171).

There are several ways in which crime could undermine democracy. In weaker, nascent states the problem of crime could be of an “entirely different magnitude from that in the established democracies” (Diamond 1999). Diamond also cautions that crime might lead citizens to engage in, or at least support, extreme measures:

In the context of weak states and inefficient, poorly disciplined police, crime may inspire drastic, illegal, unconstitutional, and grotesquely sadistic responses to try to control it . . . including popular vigilante squads that mete out instant justice to suspected perpetrators, police torture and killing of prisoners and suspects, and police-led extermination squads . . .” (Diamond 1999).

In one of the earliest empirical examinations of the impact of crime on democracy, Bermeo (1997) analyzes democratic breakdown in interwar Europe, finding that crime may have played a decisive role in undermining democratization. She finds that what “. . . seems to distinguish the casualties from the survivors in the interwar story is less the behavior of an actively anti-democratic public than the state’s capacity to provide what might be called civic order” (Bermeo 1997). Bermeo’s conclusions raise alarms for observers of Central American and Mexican politics, particularly since she finds that newer democracies have had less time “to develop more effective institutions facilitating civic order,” and they also tend to have fewer resources at their disposal to confront disorder (Bermeo 1997). In cases like Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, the new democratic governments had the additional burden of disarming insurgents and reintegrating them into peacetime society (and economy). Since newer democracies are not well-equipped to maintain order, it is easy for social unrest and violence to escalate beyond state capacity. Even when institutions are not necessarily new, authoritarian legacies can render them under-developed. For example, Mexican institutions are not new, as the contemporary courts and police are descendants of the relatively stable PRI era. Under seven decades of PRI rule, however, these institutions were kept particularly weak in order to ensure that they were subservient to the ruling party.

Recent scholarship has built upon Diamond’s (1999) and Bermeo’s (1997; 2003) foundations, particularly by examining the impact of crime on political attitudes. Seligson and Azpuru (2001) examine the impact of victimization and fear of crime on support for democracy in Guatemala. They find that victims of crime register significantly lower levels of support for democratic political institutions, less interpersonal trust, and a tendency to prefer radical change (Seligson and Azpuru 2001). In a study of Mexico City, Parás (2003) echoes these findings, as his analysis reveals that victimization is significantly correlated with less support for democracy in Mexico City.

Given the particularly elevated homicide rates in the post-conflict Central American nations, Cruz (2003) focuses on the impact of crime on public support for democracy in

Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Interestingly enough, in this analysis the effects of crime were not uniform. In Guatemala and El Salvador, crime had an impact on citizens' satisfaction with democracy; in Nicaragua, however, there was no relationship between the two. Thus, it appears that crime might pose a problem in some national contexts, yet perhaps not in others.

In addition to assessing the impact of crime on public support for democracy more broadly, scholars have also narrowed their scope to focus on specific components of democracy. For example, Pérez (2003), Parás and Coleman (2006), Pérez and Seligson (2007), and Malone (forthcoming) assess the impact of crime on citizen support for the rule of law. Parás and Coleman (2006) find a link between victimization and support for authorities' circumvention of the law, and Pérez (2003) finds that crime can create pressure for "democradura," or strong government action, which can result in repressive and undemocratic measures. A recent comparative analysis of Central American countries provides additional evidence that the effects of crime can be nuanced, as crime can render citizens more willing to support authorities' circumvention of the law, but not in all countries (Malone forthcoming). According to this analysis, the impact of crime is very much mediated by national context; two crucial components of this national context are the national homicide rate and the performance of justice institutions (Malone forthcoming).

In addition to gauging the impact of crime on political attitudes, other studies have centered on political behavior. For example, Bailey and Floros-Macías argue that fear of crime can generate "attitudes of distrust of the government and of others; the distrust leads to a variety of behavioral adjustments" (Bailey and Floros-Macías 2007: 18). Among other things, these behavioral adjustments include: restricting access to neighborhoods, joining vigilante groups, reduced participation in civic activities, and abstention from voting. In a seminal work on the impact of crime in São Paulo, Caldeira (2000) provides empirical confirmation of this linkage between crime and behavioral adjustments, demonstrating how fear of crime can restrict public interactions and increase spatial segregation. Smulovitz (2003) reaches similar conclusions in her analysis of the impact of crime on civil society in Argentina, noting that fear of crime can lead citizens to leave their homes less frequently, migrate to gated communities, acquire weapons, and hire private security services. These changing behaviors have ramifications for civil society as they typically preclude active participation in communities, and lead people to disengage from their neighbors.

A review of the literature provides evidence that spiraling crime rates can pose a threat to new democracies. However, some scholars have identified alternative scenarios, arguing that it is possible that citizens could respond to crime in ways that strengthen democracy. Following this reasoning, crime could possibly "contribute to pro-democratic behavior as civil society organizes itself in positive ways to contribute to rule-bound law enforcement" (Bailey and Flores-Macías 2007: 18). For example, large, legal protest demonstrations have been organized in Mexico City to confront rising crime rates and kidnappings (Briscoe 2006; Llana 2008). Similar to "take back the streets" groups organized in high crime areas in the United States, this type of citizen action could have the potential to strengthen democracy, channeling discontent into measures that strengthen civil society. In an analysis of survey data, Bateson (2009) lends

empirical evidence to this theory, finding that at the micro level, crime victimization is associated with increased political participation.

Thus, several studies indicate that crime can pose problems for democratization, with a few dissenting opinions. However, the linkage between these two concepts needs further refinement. While numerous studies have found evidence suggesting that crime might weaken democratic attitudes and behaviors, other work finds that this is not always the case – some countries appear able to escape from the security trap (Bailey 2009). Furthermore, recent work on crime and political behavior has articulated alternative scenarios, in which crime victims might respond with greater involvement in their communities and political affairs – responses that could actually strengthen democracy. To understand the linkage between crime and democracy, this paper turns to assess the impact of crime on political attitudes and behavior in Mexico and Central America. In these distinct national settings, the empirical analysis is able to examine the impact of different measures of crime (personal victimization, fear of crime in the neighborhood, fear of crime in the country) on political attitudes (support for the rule of law) and behaviors (voting and community participation).

Empirical Analysis of Crime’s Impact on Political Attitudes and Behavior

To examine the impact of crime on democracy, first it is important to distinguish between the actual personal experience of crime and public perceptions of crime (Smulovitz 2003). This distinction is essential for understanding exactly how crime might weaken democracy. Is personal experience with crime the crucial factor, or do perceptions of crime also matter? Fear of crime is somewhat related to victimization and objective crime rates, but it is also heavily influenced by socioeconomic status, trust in law enforcement, media exposure, and economic and political insecurities (Pain 2000; Walklate 2001; Dammert and Malone 2006). Fear of crime, especially in terms of personal vulnerability to violence, tends to be greater than an objective assessment would justify (Smulovitz 2003; Bailey 2009). When citizens clamor for the state to address deficiencies in public security, they may be acting on their own personal experiences with crime, or their perceptions that crime has soared beyond what is manageable. Consequently, officials formulating public policy must take both objective crime rates and public perceptions of crime into account.

To measure personal victimization, this analysis relies upon the following survey item: “*Were you the victim of a type of crime in the past twelve months?*” Respondents were coded as (1) *yes* and (0) *no*. This question aims to gauge respondents’ self-reported experiences with crime, but there are some limitations associated with this measure. Respondents’ definitions of an incident might not be the same as the legal definition of a crime, for example, and this tendency can lead such survey measures to over-report crimes against property and under-report crimes of violence (Bergman 2006). Sometimes respondents report crimes that occurred outside the given scope (in this case in the past twelve months). While it is important to note these limitations, such survey measures of victimization are considered to be the best indicators available of a phenomenon that can be difficult to measure.

To assess public fear of crime, this paper employs two measures. Just as the literature on economic voting distinguishes between pocketbook evaluations (personal welfare) and

sociotropic ones (evaluations of the country's economic well-being), this analysis examines the impact of respondents' assessments of personal security in their neighborhoods, as well as their perceptions of crime in the country as a whole. To measure sociotropic evaluations of crime in the country, the survey asked respondents, "*Now speaking of the country as a whole, how much do you think that the level of crime we have currently represents a threat to our wellbeing in the future?*" Responses included: (1) not at all; (2) very little; (3) somewhat; (4) a great deal. This question focuses on the national context, gauging fear of crime in more general terms. This item is considered an affective measure of fear of crime as it gauges emotive evaluations of crime in the country. In the context of countries like El Salvador and Mexico, this measure tends to tap into public perceptions of violent crimes instigated by organized crime.

To estimate respondents' evaluations of their own personal security, the survey posed the following question: "*Now speaking of the neighborhood in which you live, and thinking of the possibility of being a victim of an assault or robbery, do you feel (1) very safe; (2) somewhat safe; (3) somewhat unsafe; (4) very unsafe.*" This question is considered to be a cognitive measure of fear of crime, as it determines respondents' own risk assessments of the likelihood they will personally be victimized by specific crimes in their immediate environment. In contrast to the measure of fear of crime in the country, this cognitive measure asks respondents to indicate their fear of victimization by more "commonplace" crimes, as opposed to those sensationalized drug-related crimes that feature so prominently in the media.

Pearson correlations indicate that there is some overlap among these three measures of crime. Not surprisingly, the strongest correlation occurs between personal victimization and fear of crime in the neighborhood ($r=.169$; $p<.001$). Respondents who have been victimized in the past twelve months consider it likely they will be victimized again in their neighborhoods. While significant, the correlation between personal victimization and fear of crime in the country is much weaker in magnitude ($r=.070$; $p<.001$). In contrast, the correlation between the two different measures of fear of crime is insignificant. Thus, while these three measures of crime share some commonalities, they do tap into different aspects of crime. By distinguishing among these different components of crime, this analysis hopes to specify exactly how crime might jeopardize democracy. Is personal experience with crime the driving factor, or is it fear of crime that affects democracy most? Is fear of crime driven by people's perceptions of their immediate surroundings, or by their views of the country as a whole? Do these micro level relationships differ according to national context?

In addition to examining respondents' personal experiences with crime and their perceptions, it is also imperative to include an indicator of perceptions of institutional performance. It could be that victimization and fear of crime are not enough to affect respondents' trust in the justice system. Rather, one must take into account whether respondents will penalize the justice system for perceived failures to deal with the problem of crime decisively, instead of blaming some other institution or even the underlying causes of crime (e.g., poverty). Indeed, Bautista (2008) argues that security is an inseparable combination of facts – facts that include not just the act of delinquency itself, but also institutional responses to delinquency and perceptions of institutional capability. To address the issue of institutional performance in the area of public security, LAPOP included two questions: "*If you were the victim of a robbery or assault, how much would you trust the judicial system to punish the guilty*

party? (1) not at all; (2) very little; (3) somewhat; (4) very much.” This question was then repeated to gauge respondents’ trust in the police to apprehend the guilty party. These two survey items were combined into an additive index.⁹

In order to determine the impact of these measures of crime, one must also control for individual level attributes that might explain the dependent variables. In particular, scholars note the importance of ideology and socioeconomic characteristics in explaining political attitudes and behaviors. To take these characteristics into account, this analysis follows the conventions of survey research and incorporates variables measuring sex (men=1, women=0), age (measured in years), and education (measured as the number of years of formal schooling respondents completed). It also contained a variable measuring the size of respondents’ hometowns,¹⁰ and measured income according to the number of household possessions owned by respondents.¹¹ To determine respondents’ ideological orientation, the following question was used:

On this card there is a scale of one through ten that goes from the left to the right. Today many people, when discussing politics, talk about people that sympathize more with the left and of people that sympathize more with the right. According to the understanding that you have of the terms “left” and “right,” when thinking about your political views, where would you put yourself on this scale? Indicate the point that is closest to your own position.

Respondents were shown a card where a value of one indicated the far left, and a ten the far right.

Crime and Political Attitudes

To examine the impact of these three measures of crime, this analysis begins by examining respondents’ respect for the rule of law. This political attitude is one of the cornerstones of democracy, and according to the literature, the cornerstone that is most vulnerable when crime rates escalate (Pérez 2003; Briscoe 2006). To estimate respect for the rule of law, this analysis focuses on respondents’ willingness to allow authorities to circumvent the law: “*To capture criminals, do you think that authorities (1) should always respect the law or (0) on occasion act on the margin of the law*”? This operationalization taps into a key issue in the fight against crime, as human rights advocates have worried that in some cases the military and law enforcement officials have stretched the law and abused human rights in their crusade against crime, and that fearful citizens will endorse such measures. Table 1 reports the results of the empirical analysis for each country.

⁹The additive scale records respondents’ average responses to both of these questions (Cronbach’s alpha = .787).

¹⁰ The variable measuring the size of respondents’ town or city was coded as: (1) rural area; (2) small city; (3) medium city; (4) large city; (5) capital city.

¹¹ The income scale was calculated based upon answers to the following survey items: Do you or any member of your household have any of the following possessions? TV; car; refrigerator; telephone; cell phone; computer; microwave oven; washing machine; drinking water; sewage system. Responses were coded as (1) yes and (0) no. I created an index of personal income using a means formula that included a case if there were valid responses to at least eight of the ten items.

Table 1: Binomial Logistic Regression Results for Respect for the Rule of Law

| Independent Variables | Mexico | Guatemala | El Salvador | Honduras | Nicaragua | Costa Rica | Panama |
|---|------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Victimization | -.230 [‡] (.164) | -.195 [‡] (.173) | -.314* (.149) | .285 (.178) | -.168 (.174) | -.185 (.177) | .191 (.226) |
| Fear of Crime in the Neighborhood | -.276*** (.074) | -.444*** (.074) | -.142* (.059) | -.439*** (.077) | -.133 (.072) | -.015 (.077) | -.321*** (.077) |
| Fear of Crime in the Country | .284*** (.077) | .238** (.092) | -.221* (.099) | .060 (.078) | -.165 (.105) | -.110 (.105) | .265** (.093) |
| Perception of Institutional Performance | .023 (.073) | -.041 (.075) | .196** (.066) | .269** (.082) | .143 (.076) | .121 (.079) | -.031 (.077) |
| Sex (Men) | -.191 (.124) | -.011 (.133) | -.284* (.116) | -.071 (.121) | -.164 (.131) | -.532*** (.134) | -.096 (.122) |
| Education | -.046* (.019) | .023 (.020) | -.005 (.015) | -.008 (.019) | .032 (.018) | -.022 (.018) | -.037 (.020) |
| Income | .651* (.314) | -1.463*** (.362) | -.018 (.318) | -.473 (.291) | .112 (.351) | -.797* (.399) | -.210 (.314) |
| Age | .003 (.004) | .000 (.005) | .020*** (.004) | -.001 (.005) | .018*** (.005) | .006 (.004) | -.005 (.004) |
| Size of Town | -.111* (.047) | .103 (.053) | -.018 (.044) | .173*** (.050) | -.122** (.046) | -.103* (.041) | .210*** (.044) |
| Ideology (Conservative) | .013 (.027) | .019 (.028) | -.082*** (.021) | -.044 (.026) | -.037 (.020) | -.012 (.025) | -.017 (.033) |
| Nagelkerke Pseudo R Squared | .065 | .084 | .074 | .068 | .055 | .060 | .054 |
| N | 1277 | 994 | 1549 | 1174 | 1010 | 1017 | 1190 |

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

[‡]In these models, personal victimization fell short of attaining statistical significance, but this appears to be due to problems with multicollinearity.

The results reported in Table 1 indicate that crime does influence public support for the rule of law, but the relationship is quite nuanced. In three countries with problems with gang violence -- Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala -- both personal victimization and fear of crime in the neighborhood emerge as important predictors of citizens' willingness to allow authorities to act on the margin of the law. Fear of crime in the neighborhood is negative and highly significant. Victimization is also negative and significant in El Salvador, and close to attaining significance in Mexico and Guatemala. In Honduras, only fear of crime in the neighborhood is significant; personal victimization does not have an impact on support for the rule of law, and this does not appear attributable to multicollinearity.

Very different patterns emerge when examining the impact of fear of crime in the country, however. In Mexico and Guatemala, perceptions of crime in the country were significant and *positive*. That is, respondents who were more fearful that crime was a threat to the country were *more* likely to state that authorities should always respect the law. This relationship was quite puzzling, but might be better understood when placed in the context of the contemporary crime crisis. As numerous reports implicate police and other law enforcement officials in criminal activities, those who are more fearful of crime at the national level might associate crime with official misconduct, such as complicity in narco-trafficking. This heightened preference for authorities to always respect the law might be a reaction to authorities' perceived corruption and collusion with criminal organizations. Still, it is important to note that in El Salvador, fear of crime in the country wielded the opposite sign; respondents who were more fearful of crime in the country were *less* likely to state that authorities should always respect the law. In El Salvador and Honduras, perceptions of justice institutions also were important, as those who perceived the courts and police as capable of apprehending and sentencing criminals were more supportive of the rule of law. In other words, respondents satisfied with the current working of the system did not wish to grant extra-legal processes to officials. In all three of these countries, the social identity variables yielded inconsistent results.

Panama followed a similar pattern to that of Mexico and Guatemala, as both fear of crime in the neighborhood and fear of crime in the country were significant, and the former was positive and the latter negative. Thus, respondents who feared victimization in their own neighborhoods were more likely to give authorities leeway and allow them to circumvent the law. However, as was the case with Mexico and Guatemala, higher levels of fear of crime in the country had the opposite effect -- as fear of crime in the country increased, support for extra-legal measures decreased. In Panama, size of the town was the only other variable to register statistical significance, as those from larger municipalities were more willing to allow authorities to act on the margins of the law.

In Costa Rica and Nicaragua, all three measures of crime were not significant predictors of support for the rule of law. Instead, some socio-economic characteristics emerged as significant, particularly the size of respondents' municipalities. In both cases respondents in larger cities, where crime is a much larger problem, were more likely to give authorities leeway in apprehending criminals. In both of these cases, perceptions of institutional performance came close to attaining statistical significance, with $p < .07$. These countries share one commonality -- that rates of violent crime are far lower than the regional average. Still, according to measures like the Freedom House, the performance of the justice system in Costa Rica far exceeds that of Nicaragua. Costa Rica's higher cross-national ranking hides an important trend, however, as it does not capture longitudinal trends. While Costa Rica's justice performance is high for the region, this performance has deteriorated over time. Both international observers like the Freedom House, as well as Costa Ricans themselves have noted that today's performance is much lower than that of the past. Prominent officials have indicated that this reflects the fact that recent increases in crime, while modest for the region, have overwhelmed a justice system accustomed to much lower levels of criminality.¹²

¹² Author interviews, July 2010.

Crime and Political Behavior

In addition to examining political attitudes, it is also important to gauge crime's impact on political behavior. This section examines the impact of crime on two types of political behavior: voting and community participation. While other types of political behavior are also important (e.g., protest activity, working on political campaigns), voting is the fundamental component of conventional democratic political participation. An analysis of crime and voting behavior will determine whether crime can lead to voter apathy, for example. Also, community participation taps into a level of civic engagement social capital theorists have cited as crucial for democracy. This analysis begins with these two political behaviors, with the goal of expanding in scope to include other crucial political behaviors in the future.

The LAPOP survey measured voting behavior with the question: "*If elections were this Sunday, which party would you vote for? (1) would not vote; (2) would vote for the governing party or candidate; (3) would vote for the opposition; (4) would cast a null vote.*" For this analysis, the variable was recoded so that a value of one corresponded to casting a valid vote, and zero to the casting of a null vote or not voting at all. This measure aims to capture whether crime can lead to voter apathy, gauging respondents' self-reported voting behavior in a specific election, it does assess respondents' immediate willingness to participate in the electoral process.

As Table 2 indicates, the three measures of crime have inconsistent effects on voting behavior. Victimization is significant only in Mexico, where personal experience with crime reduces the likelihood of casting a valid vote. Fear of crime in the neighborhood reduces the likelihood of casting a valid vote only in Guatemala and Honduras. In contrast, fear of crime at the national level *increased* the likelihood of voting in Guatemala and El Salvador. While these inconsistent effects make it difficult to identify patterns in the region, Table 2 does illustrate that in the countries without problems with gang violence (Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama) none of the three measures of crime influence voting behavior.

In these three countries without the problem of gang violence, perceptions of institutional performance were significant predictors of voting behavior. The perception that the justice system could effectively capture and prosecute criminals was significantly linked to higher likelihoods of casting a valid ballot in these three countries (Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua). Interestingly enough, one of the countries plagued by gang violence, El Salvador, also followed this trend.

As was the case in Table 1, the socio-economic variables performed inconsistently across the countries, with the exception of the size of respondents' municipalities. With the exception of Costa Rica and Honduras, respondents in larger cities were less likely to cast valid ballots than in their smaller counterparts.

Table 2: Binomial Logistic Regression Results for Voting Behavior

| Independent Variables | Mexico | Guatemala | El Salvador | Honduras | Nicaragua | Costa Rica | Panama |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Victimization | -.461* (.217) | .332 (.226) | .314 (.218) | -.034 (.207) | .057 (.196) | -.010 (.195) | .292 (.252) |
| Fear of Crime in the Neighborhood | -.026 (.102) | -.296** (.095) | .009 (.081) | -.100** (.089) | .102 (.080) | -.120 (.084) | .099 (.082) |
| Fear of Crime in the Country | .117 (.102) | .319** (.110) | .216 [‡] (.119) | -.303 (.096) | -.148 (.124) | .122 (.110) | -.136 (.104) |
| Perception of Institutional Performance | .104 (.101) | .195 (.100) | .193* (.088) | -.065 (.095) | .190** (.087) | .239** (.089) | .200* (.082) |
| Sex (Men) | .045 (.172) | -.013 (.174) | .139 (.157) | -.040 (.146) | .237 (.148) | .014 (.149) | .037 (.133) |
| Education | .001 (.026) | -.006 (.026) | .056** (.020) | .052* (.023) | .039 (.021) | .007 (.022) | .071* (.022) |
| Income | .030 (.438) | 1.343** (.457) | .607 (.440) | .875* (.352) | .043 (.397) | .659 (.435) | .487 (.344) |
| Age | .006 (.006) | -.003 (.006) | .013* (.005) | .010 (.006) | .015** (.006) | .015** (.005) | .010* (.005) |
| Size of Town | -.158* (.064) | -.212** (.069) | .142* (.060) | -.061 (.060) | -.156** (.051) | -.031 (.046) | -.156** (.048) |
| Ideology (Conservative) | .133*** (.036) | -.010 (.036) | -.043 (.026) | -.015 (.031) | .031 (.022) | .067* (.028) | .049 (.035) |
| Nagelkerke Pseudo R Squared | .059 | .084 | .103 | .065 | .045 | .059 | .048 |
| N | 966 | 778 | 1090 | 926 | 889 | 912 | 1088 |

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

[‡]In these models, personal victimization fell short of attaining statistical significance, but this appears to be due to problems with multicollinearity.

The results of Table 2 indicate that the impact of crime on voting behavior is mediated by national context, but the variations observed do not always correspond to macro level differences of the scope of the crime crisis and performance of crime-fighting institutions. Other factors are clearly at play. It could be that the rate of increase in violent crime is the more salient factor, rather than the static snapshot of current homicide rates. The relationship between crime and voting behavior might also hinge on the nuances of the election at hand. For example, if crime is politicized in recent elections, as most certainly has been the case in Guatemala, this electoral saliency could heighten the impact of crime. As this project progresses, these dynamics between crime and voting behavior must be explored in greater depth.

The analysis now turns to examine the impact of crime on community participation. Community participation was measured with the following question: “*Now, changing the topic, in the last twelve months have you contributed to your community, neighbors, or neighborhood in order to solve a problem? Please tell me if you did so at least once a week, one or two times a month, one or two times a year, or never.*” Responses were coded as (1) never, (2) one or two times a year, (3) one or two times a month, and (4) once a week. Table 3 reports the results of the ordinal regression analysis.

Table 3: Ordinal Logistic Regression Results for Community Participation

| Independent Variables | Mexico | Guatemala | El Salvador | Honduras | Nicaragua | Costa Rica | Panama |
|---|------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| Victimization | .517** (.162) | .378* (.163) | .428** (.148) | .536** (.178) | .565** (.177) | .336 [‡] (.174) | .251 (.227) |
| Fear of Crime in the Neighborhood | -.017 (.073) | -.016 (.069) | .065 (.060) | -.123 (.079) | -.034 (.077) | .019 (.076) | .188* (.081) |
| Fear of Crime in the Country | .063 (.080) | .098 (.092) | .105 (.107) | .152 (.083) | .298* (.124) | .109 (.110) | -.271** (.095) |
| Perception of Institutional Performance | .021 (.071) | .154* (.072) | -.131 (.069) | -.027 (.084) | .079 (.082) | .112 (.079) | .072 (.083) |
| Sex (Men) | .097 (.123) | .557* (.129) | .310* (.120) | .165 (.127) | .269 (.143) | .199 (.134) | .474*** (.134) |
| Education | .006 (.018) | .021 (.019) | .069*** (.015) | .045* (.020) | .045* (.019) | .044* (.018) | -.011 (.021) |
| Income | -.583 (.309) | .640 (.343) | -.290 (.326) | .320 (.303) | .219 (.373) | -.185 (.390) | .972** (.349) |
| Age | .013** (.004) | .010* (.004) | .017*** (.004) | .015** (.005) | .015** (.005) | .009* (.004) | .011* (.004) |
| Size of Town | -.013 (.046) | -.108* (.051) | -.052 (.046) | -.163** (.054) | -.136** (.050) | -.096* (.042) | -.059 (.047) |
| Ideology (Conservative) | -.028 (.026) | -.041 (.026) | .004 (.021) | -.029 (.028) | -.024 (.022) | .016 (.025) | .064 (.036) |
| Nagelkerke Pseudo R Squared | .028 | .054 | .056 | .043 | .042 | .025 | .049 |
| N | 1281 | 1005 | 1352 | 1140 | 1009 | 1015 | 1180 |

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

[‡]In these models, personal victimization fell short of attaining statistical significance, but this appears to be due to problems with multicollinearity.

Table 3 indicates that some measures of crime have a strong impact on community participation, but others do not. In every case but Panama, victimization is associated with higher levels of community activism. Based on these results, one cannot say that the personal

experience of victimization led respondents to engage in their communities. However, at the very least these results indicate that victimization does not lead citizens to withdraw from their communities. Panama is the exception to this trend, where it was fear of crime in the neighborhood that was associated with higher levels of community activism, not personal experience with crime. Panama's findings were unique in other ways too, as fear of crime in the country was associated with less participation. The only other country to report a significant link between fear of crime in the country and community activism was Nicaragua, where the relationship was positive. This positive result makes sense in the case of Nicaragua, with its tradition of strong linkages between civil society and the police.

The variable measuring perceptions of institutional performance, as well as the socio-economic variables, were inconsistent. Still, Table 3 does highlight some important findings. Most importantly, when examining the linkage between crime and community participation, these findings argue that crime does not unilaterally lead citizens to withdraw from community life. In almost all cases victims reported more activism, and in the case of Panama and Nicaragua, fear of crime was sometimes linked to higher levels of activism as well (although there are some contradictions in the findings in Panama).

Discussion

As the crime crisis intensifies, officials and commentators have expressed concern about the state of democracy in the region. This analysis aimed to provide an empirical examination of crime's impact on democracy at the micro level, to see if such alarm is warranted. Based upon this analysis of survey data, it appears that crime has the potential to exert an impact on political attitudes and behaviors that are deemed essential to democracy. However, this relationship is quite nuanced. It is important to distinguish between actual experiences with crime and perceptions of crime. In addition, it is important to place these micro level experiences and perceptions in the appropriate national context, as these micro-level relationships vary significantly from country to country.

This analysis examined public support for the rule of law, voting behavior, and community participation. Other behaviors and attitudes also warrant scrutiny. For example, this project plans to expand and examine the relationship between these three measures of crime and other attitudes, such as tolerance and support for vigilante justice. In addition, this project also plans to assess the impact of crime on important behaviors as well, such as participation in protest activities and acquisition of private security measures. As this project progresses, any comments are most welcome.

Appendix

A. Homicide Data Sources and Years

| Country | Homicide Rate | Source | Year |
|-------------|---------------|--|------|
| Argentina | 5.24 | UN | 2006 |
| Bolivia | 4.85 | UN | 2006 |
| Brazil | 25.7 | www.ritla.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2314&Itemid=147 | 2008 |
| Chile | 1.6 | seguridadciudadana.gob.cl (08) | 2008 |
| Colombia | 39.87 | http://www.genevadeclaration.org/fileadmin/docs/Global-Burden-of-Armed-Violence-full-report.pdf | 2005 |
| Costa Rica | 7.7 | OCAVI (2006) | 2006 |
| Ecuador | 17.8 | www.inec.gov.ec (2008) | 2008 |
| El Salvador | 49.2 | Georgetown (2007) | 2007 |
| Guatemala | 48.4 | Guatemalan National Police, as reported in Mendoza (2008) | 2008 |
| Honduras | 57.9 | OCAVI (2008) | 2008 |
| Mexico | 11.6 | ICESI (2008) | 2008 |
| Nicaragua | 12.5 | OCAVI (2006) | 2006 |
| Panama | 12.9 | OCAVI (2007) | 2007 |
| Paraguay | 12.33 | UN | 2006 |
| Peru | 5.54 | UN | 2004 |
| Uruguay | 4.7 | UN | 2004 |
| Venezuela | 48.0 | OAS http://www.oas.org/dsp/documentos/Publicaciones/Seg%20Publica-%20Venezuela%20y%20Bolivia.pdf | 2007 |

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