

University of Colorado, Boulder

Political Science Honors Thesis

Trust in the Police in Latin America: Understanding the Urban and Rural Divide

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Fall 2018

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ABSTRACT

Trust in the police is low throughout Latin America, particularly among residents of urban areas. The principle aim of this investigation is to determine why people in rural areas exhibit higher levels of trust in the police than their urban counterparts. This study focuses on the instrumental perspective of explaining trust, which emphasizes the importance of the performance of the police. Measures of negative experiences with the performance of the police are used to explain the difference in trust between urban and rural areas. The analyses find that people in urban areas are more frequently victimized by crime and solicited for bribes by police officers. Additionally, through regression analyses these differences in experience are determined to be a significant explanation for the differences in trust. The role of police performance in informing citizen trust has important implications for improving trust.

## **Trust in the Police in Latin America: Understanding the Urban and Rural Divide**

### INTRODUCTION

Police are often at the center of controversy in Latin America. Often times, public opinion sees the national police as untrustworthy and morally corrupt (“A Broken,” 2014). Citizens in Latin America tend to have lower overall trust in institutions than other regions, but they particularly lack trust in their police (Cao & Zhao, 2005). In fact, in a ranking of countries by confidence in law and order, Latin American and Caribbean states consistently exhibit the lowest confidence in the police (McCarthy, 2018). Addressing issues with trust is crucial to fostering better cooperation between police and citizens. Without citizens to report crime, the police cannot effectively address crime and insecurity (Arias & Unger, 2009). In a region with some of the highest violent crime rates in the world, improving the effectiveness of the police is vital to future security and prosperity (Bello, 2017). Furthermore, the police are the institution of government that citizens have the most day-to-day interaction with, so the perceived trustworthiness of the police is fundamental to formations of social capital between government and citizens (Sun et al, 2013).

Although overall trust in the police is low throughout the region, certain populations have lower trust than others. One variation in levels of trust exists between the residents of urban and rural areas. Quite surprisingly, in 2014 the average trust in the national police was higher in rural areas than in urban areas in all eighteen Latin American countries examined.<sup>1</sup> This is perplexing because, generally speaking, indigenous and other minority groups that largely reside in rural areas feel more marginalized by the state (Huebert & Liu, 2016). It is unclear how this

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<sup>1</sup> The research in this project builds off a previous study I conducted, in the undergraduate political science research fellowship, on the same question using data only from 2014. This project resembles this research closely but uses data from 2004 to 2014 and therefore produces distinct statistical outcomes.

relationship manifests itself over time and what elements best explain these differences in trust. Finding the key explanations for differences in trust between urban and rural areas will provide valuable insight into how trust in the police is built. Why do people in rural areas have higher levels of trust in the police than people in urban areas?

In this study, I consider how certain aspects of living in an urban or rural area impact trust in the police. Using data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP, 2014), I explore trust in the police in urban and rural areas in eighteen Latin American countries. I examine how instrumental considerations, which relate to the performance of the police, result in differing levels of trust in urban and rural areas. This study finds that the more frequent negative experiences of urban residents with the police, such as being a victim of a crime or being solicited for a bribe by a police officer, partially account for the lower levels of trust in urban areas.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature on trust in the police makes a clear distinction between two key perspectives: the instrumental perspective and the procedural perspective (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). The instrumental perspective posits that people are more likely to trust the police, and thus cooperate with the police, if the police successfully perform their function. This function includes, but is not limited to; creating credible punishments for those who break the law, controlling crime and criminal behavior, and distributing police services fairly across communities. In contrast, the procedural perspective emphasizes the importance of citizens' perspective on the fairness of the process by which the police carry out their function. This perspective puts more importance on how fair, respectful, and non-discriminatory people feel that their police are. Under this perspective, as long as the process through which police work is

done is just in the eyes of citizens, crime and other performance based concerns do not have a sizable impact on trust.

The instrumental perspective is key to explaining the differences in trust in the police between people in urban areas and rural areas. The primary reason is that it recognizes the importance of personal experience. Experts in political psychology argue that personal experience is a building block of trust (Salmi, Smolej, & Kivivuori 2007, Brehm & Rahn 1997, & Putnam 2000). Russell Hardin even goes so far to say that trust is a “by-product” of experiences (Hardin, 1993). Within the instrumental perspective, a person who has more negative personal experiences with crime and corruption is less likely to trust the police. Because rural areas have lower population density and a much smaller state presence than urban areas, a person in a rural area has fewer interactions with crime and the police than a person in an urban area (Huebert & Liu, 2016). While experiences such as crime victimization and bribe solicitation may have a similar impact on a person from a rural area, the relatively low frequency with which these events take place could be accounting for the higher levels of trust experienced by rural residents.

Previous studies find impressive support for the instrumental perspective. To begin, several sources look for correlations between high rates of crime and low levels of trust in the police. For example, Blanco (2013) finds that high surges of crime and the perceived incompetence of the police they generate are correlated with lower trust. Additionally, Sabet (2013) studies whether perceptions of incompetence caused by high crime rates and corruption are correlated with low levels of trust in the police. Sabet ultimately finds that the single most significant factor contributing to poor trust in the police is being solicited for a bribe by a police officer. Moreover, Ávila (2016) focuses on the factors individuals identify as being important for

building trust. Among these factors, the most common are honesty and performance (Ávila, 2016).

Other comparative studies find associations between corruption and trust in the police. For example, Kääriäinen (2007) finds corruption of the government overall to be the strongest indicator of low trust in the police in European states. Furthermore, although not specifically about the police, Chang & Chu (2006) finds a strong link between high levels institutional corruption and low levels of trust in institutions, which manifests uniformly across Asian democracies. They state that strong democratic norms do not “neutralize the negative impact of corruption” (Chang & Chu, 2006). Finally, Ren et al’s (2016) study of trust in the police in the United States finds that victims of crime or people with traffic violations have lower levels of trust in the police. These studies focusing on factors relating to the instrumental perspective demonstrate a clear trend within the literature that views police performance as an important building block of trust.

The other school of thought is the procedural perspective. The procedural perspective assumes that trust depends on perceptions of the fairness of the system. The procedural perspective is popular in studies on trust in the police in the United States. For instance, Nix (2014) finds that good perceptions of police fairness in procedural justice inspires higher levels of confidence in the police. Other studies on the United States focus on the role of ethnicity in trust. These studies often find that minority ethnic groups that feel marginalized or profiled by the police have much lower trust than their white counterparts (Peek, Lowe & Alston 1981, Lurigio, Greenleaf & Flexon 2009, & Thompson & Khan 2016). Several studies in Latin America focus on how programs and policy reforms regarding the police impact trust. The consensus among the authors appears to be that programs that incorporate community members

in security matters, such as neighborhood watch, tend to foster better relationships between citizens and police officers (Gonzales 2016, Arias & Unger 2009). In addition to the works on the Latin America and the United States, Sun et al (2013) considers both procedural and instrumental measures when comparing trust in the police between urban, rural and migrant populations in China. The study finds that procedural concerns have a greater impact on trust than instrumental concerns.

Despite these findings, the instrumental perspective is more applicable to my research. The procedural perspective does not take into account experience only attitudes and perceptions about the fairness of the process. One of the problems with focusing on the procedural perspective is attitudes and perceptions are hard to measure. A lot of the finer points about whether or not someone feels that the criminal justice system is fair can only be captured on an individual basis through in depth interviews. Unfortunately, these research techniques do not lend themselves well to a comparative investigation. Another important reason that the procedural perspective does not work for this research is endogeneity. This perspective focuses on how perception of fairness or respect influence trust, but an argument can be made that trust in the police influences perceptions of fairness. Therefore, in order to avoid endogeneity bias, I opt not to use measures from the procedural perspective in my investigation.

#### HYPOTHESIS

1. More negative experience with the performance of the police will lower reported levels of trust in the police.
2. The more frequent negative experiences urban residents have with the performance of the police, the lower their trust in the police.

## METHODS

In order to test the hypothesis, this study uses data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). This Vanderbilt University project is a region-wide survey that asks a representative sample of participants demographic and value-based questions. I use data from 2004 to 2014. Although the survey contains all countries considered to be part of the “Americas,” I use responses from the countries traditionally considered Latin America. These countries are: Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, and Dominican Republic.

The dependent variable, trust in the police, is derived from the following LAPOP survey question: “Do you trust the national police?” This question is measured on a scale of one to seven, one being “Not at all” and seven being “A lot.” Whether the participant resides in an urban or rural area is measured with a dummy variable, which is called “Urban” for the purpose of this investigation. Other independent variables are measures of a participant’s experience with the performance of the police. The first independent variable measures the extent to which a participant has been a victim of crime. The survey question asks participants how many times they were victimized in the preceding twelve months, zero being the lowest amount and 20 being the highest. The other variable used to measure experience with the performance of the police is whether or not a citizen has been solicited for a bribe by a police officer. This is a dummy variable which asks participants, “Has a police officer asked you for a bribe in the past 12 months?” This variable is selected to measure experience with the performance of the police because it represents how susceptible a police force is to corruption. Admittedly, police bribery could fall under the procedural justice perspective as well. For the purpose of this study, it is

considered a measure of performance because it falls under the “performing their duty fairly across communities” aspect of police work discussed in Sunshine (2003).

I employ a number of control variables in this study. The control variables are mainly selected for their relevance in previous literature (Jamison 2011, Cao & Zao 2005, & Stamatakis 2016). The control variables chosen are sex, age, years of education received, and wealth. Wealth is measured using an index of asset ownership: a refrigerator, a cellular phone, a microwave, a washing machine, a television, indoor drinking water access, an indoor bathroom, and a computer. As the relative wealth of a participant becomes higher, the value of the index increases. The Cronbach’s Alpha for the index is 0.799, meaning the combination of the different indicators creates a fairly reliable measure of affluence.<sup>2</sup> The number of control variables is fairly low, as it is best to include fewer and more relevant controls in to keep the number of observations in the analysis high. In addition to the previously listed controls, I include country-fixed effects because there are many cultural and situational differences among Latin American countries.

In order to evaluate the variables above, I estimate ordinary least squares regression. I use multiple models in order to measure the effect of the independent variables on the relationship between living in a urban or rural area and trust in the police.

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<sup>2</sup> More details on the wealth index can be found in the table in Appendix 1 on page 23.

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

Figure 1: Trust in the Police in Urban and Rural Areas Over Time

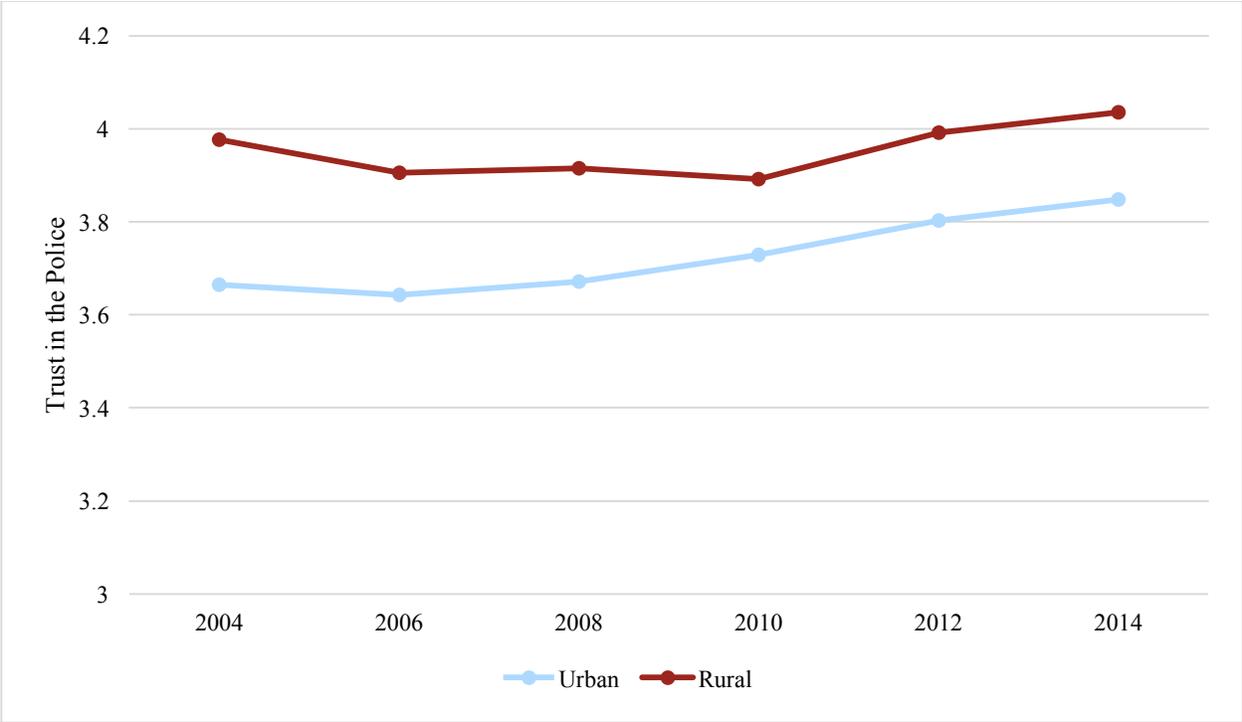


Figure 1 represents the changes in trust in the police in urban and rural areas across Latin America over time from 2004 to 2014. The line representing trust in urban areas remains below the line representing trust in rural areas. Ultimately, this graph is important because it shows that the relationship between living in a rural area and having higher trust in the police exists across time during the years the LAPOP survey is conducted.

Figure 2: Urban vs Rural Confidence in Police by Country

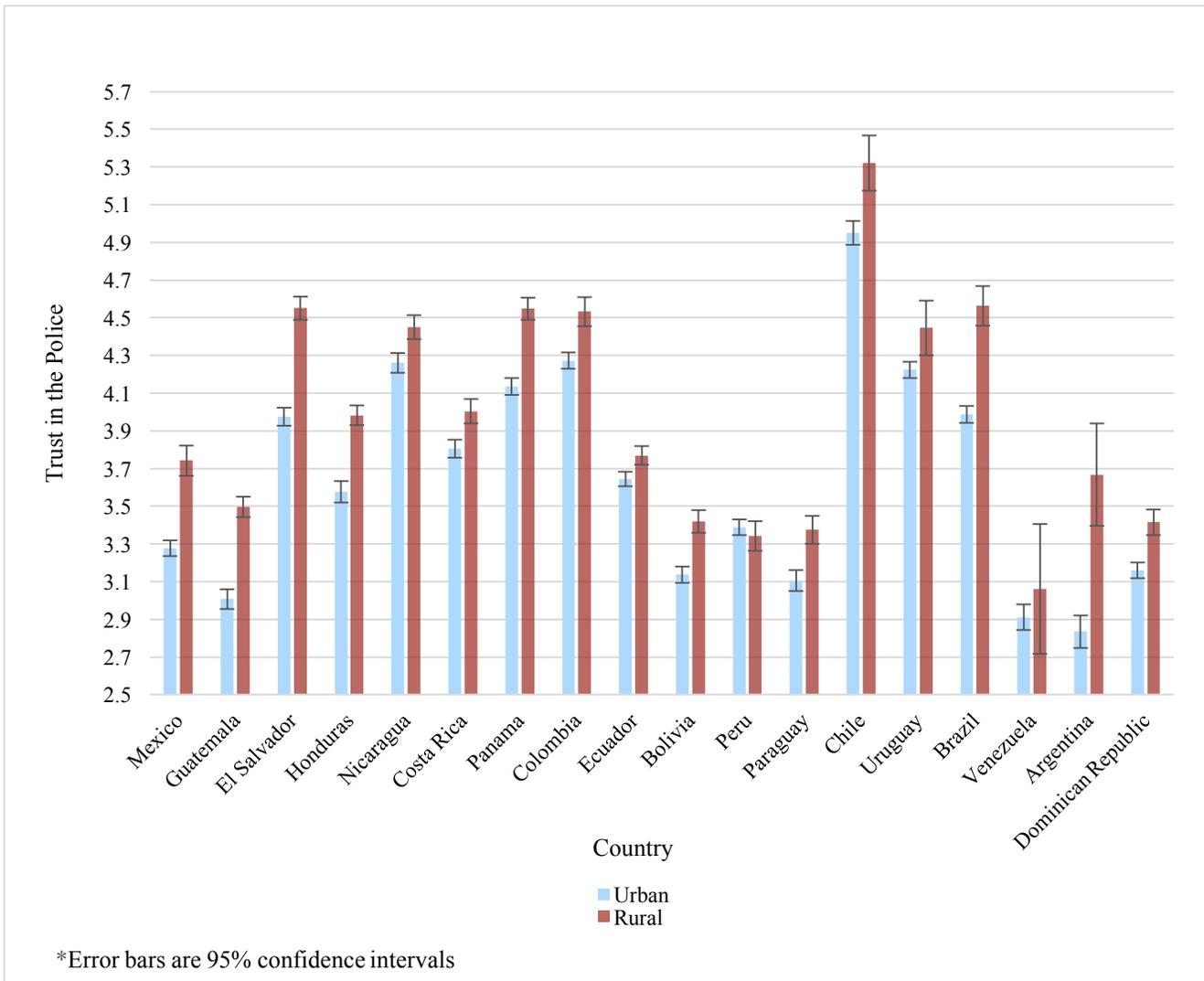


Figure 2 shows the average trust in the police from 2004 to 2014 in all 18 countries by urban and rural populations. This demonstrates that trust in the police is higher in rural areas in all countries except Peru. Furthermore, as indicated by the 95 percent confidence intervals, this relationship is statistically significant in all countries but Peru and Venezuela. It is important to keep this graph in mind moving forward, because this is the difference in trust the later analyses explain.

Figure 3: Crime Victimization Urban vs. Rural by Country

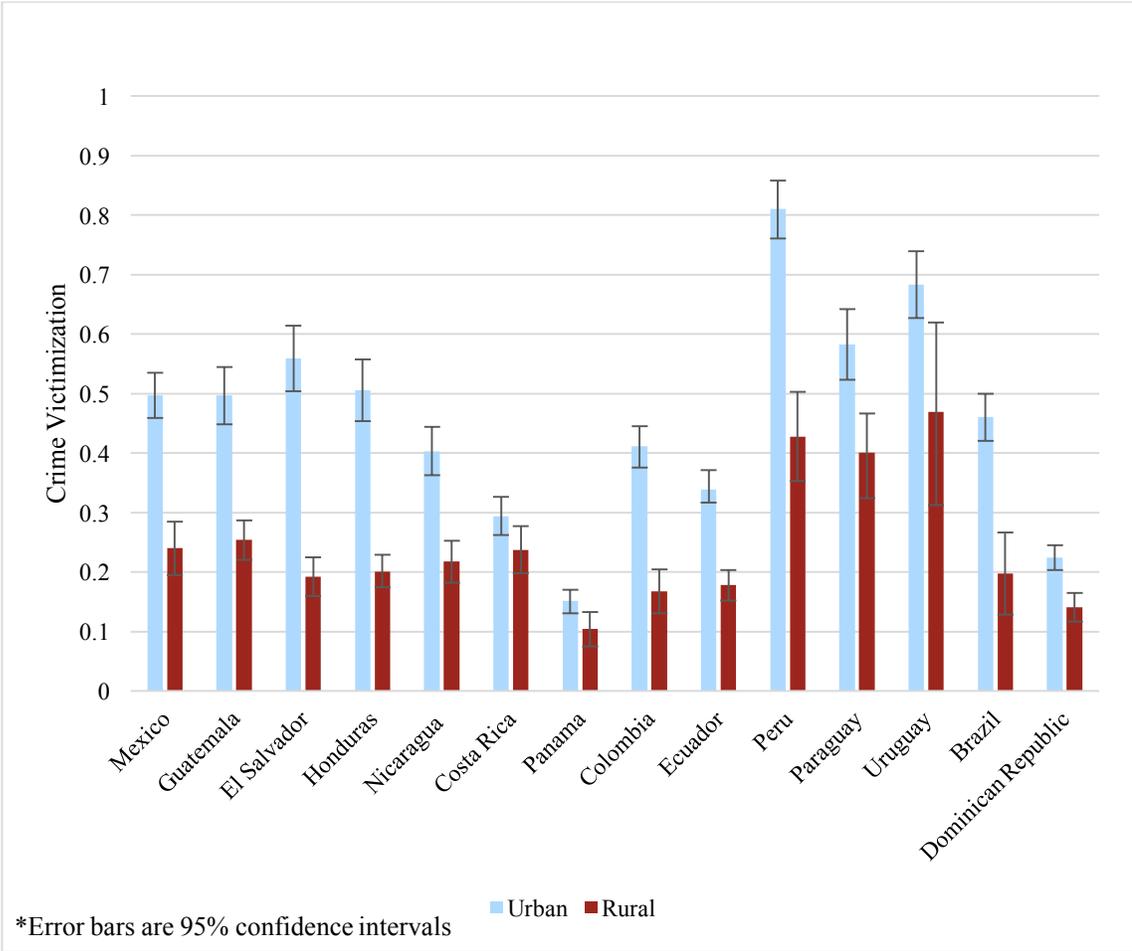
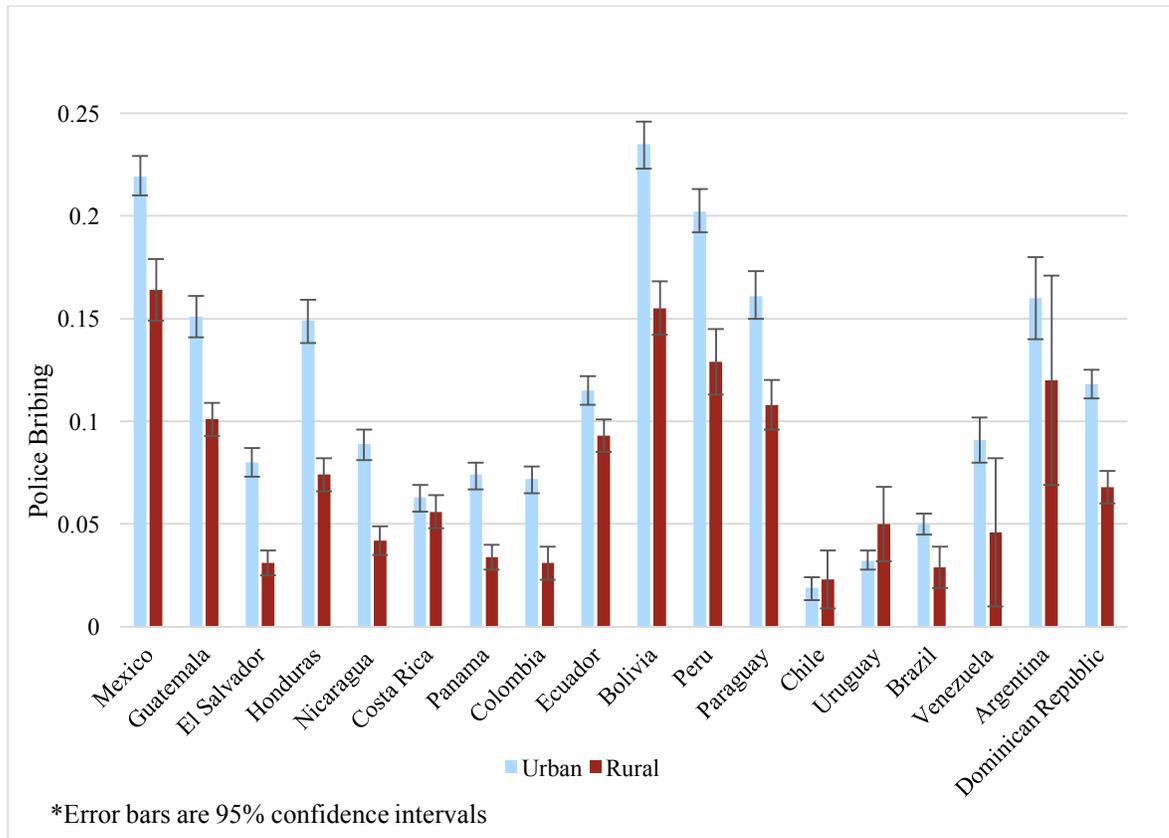


Figure 4: Police Bribing Urban vs. Rural by Country



Figures 3 and 4 are visual representations of the independent variables in both urban and rural areas. The degree to which a participant has been a victim of a crime is shown in Figure 3. In all countries, participants in rural areas are victimized less frequently than participants in urban areas. This relationship is statistically significant in all countries except Costa Rica and Panama. Additionally, in Figure 4 the share of which participants who answered “yes” to the question of whether or not they had been asked for a bribe by a police officer is higher in urban areas than in rural areas. From the error bars we can see that this relationship is significant in all countries but Costa Rica, Chile, Uruguay, Venezuela and Argentina. The relationship is reversed in Chile and Uruguay.

These descriptive results are important for two reasons. First, they show evidence for one of the assumptions of the second hypothesis- that people in urban areas are having more negative personal experiences with the performance of the police than people in rural areas. Second, Figures 2 through 4 show that higher trust in the police in rural areas in most countries corresponds with lower rates of victimization and police bribing. Although this information alone does not prove the hypothesis, it does serve as a preliminary support for it. If my hypotheses are correct, these differences in experience are accounting for the differences in trust.

MULTIPLE REGRESSION RESULTS

Table 1: OLS Regression Models for Trust in the Police

	Model 1: Baseline			Model 2: + Victimization			Model 3: + Police bribes			Model 4: All study variables		
	Coeff	SE	p> t	Coeff	SE	p> t	Coeff	SE	p> t	Coeff	SE	p> t
Urban	0.230	(.035)	0.000	0.186	(0.036)	0.000	0.218	(0.036)	0.000	0.179	(0.037)	0.000
Victimization				-0.149	(0.030)	0.000				-0.129	(0.029)	0.000
Police bribe							-0.653	(0.034)	0.000	-0.584	(0.033)	0.000
Sex	0.044	(.015)	0.010	0.024	(0.017)	0.167	-0.008	(0.014)	0.567	-0.02	(0.017)	0.259
Age	0.005	(.002)	0.041	0.002	(0.002)	0.120	0.004	(0.002)	0.075	0.003	(0.002)	0.189
Years of Education	-0.016	(.005)	0.004	-0.013	(0.005)	0.024	-0.014	(0.005)	0.010	-0.012	(0.005)	0.038
Wealth	-0.029	(.015)	0.064	-0.037	(0.013)	0.008	-0.022	(0.014)	0.139	-0.031	(0.012)	0.020
Country fixed effects	Yes			Yes			Yes			Yes		
Contant	3.157	(.136)	0.000	3.393	(0.129)	0.000	3.345	(0.142)	0.000	3.552	(0.136)	0.000
N	131,381			67,402			129,648			66,229		
R <sup>2</sup>	0.072			0.082			0.082			0.090		

Table 1 presents the OLS regression results. I use four models to see the effect of inserting each one of the main independent variables on the relationship between trust in the police and living in an urban or rural area. The first model is the baseline, which is a model that

only looks at the relationship between trust in the police and the controls. In the second and third models, the main independent variables are added to the regression individually in order to see the effect they have on the coefficient “Urban”. Because I am not simply investigating why people do or do not trust the police, but rather how the environment they live in has an effect on trust, it is necessary to see how adding new variables to the model impact “Urban”. In the baseline model, “Urban” has a coefficient of 0.230 and is statistically significant.

In the second and third models, adding the independent variables that measure personal experiences with performance, decreases the value of the “Urban” coefficient. In the second model, where I add the measure of victimization, the coefficient for urban drops from 0.230 to 0.186, a 19% decrease from the baseline coefficient value. In the third model, where I add the dummy variable for whether a participant has been solicited for a bribe, the coefficient does drop in value but to a lesser extent: from 0.230 to 0.218, approximately a 5% decrease. It is also important to note the coefficients of the respective independent variables in these models. In the second model, a one unit change in “Victimization” lowers trust by 0.149 on the five-point scale. The negative value indicates that the more frequently a participant is a victim of a crime the level to which they trust the police decreases. In the third model, “Police bribe” lowers trust by a large amount: 0.653 on the five-unit scale. The negative relationship indicates that answering “yes” (yes=1, no=0) to the question “Have you been solicited for a bribe by the national police?” corresponds with lower trust in the police.

In the final model, with all the variables, the coefficient for “Urban” drops from the baseline of 0.230 to 0.179 and stays significant, about a 22% decrease in value. In this model the coefficient for victimization is -0.12. “Urban” and both the independent variables have the same, unchanged, statistical significance. This decrease demonstrates that the independent variables are

partly explaining the relationship between living in an urban area and having lower trust in the police. The fact that “Urban” is still statistically significant indicates that “Victimization” and “Police bribe” do not entirely explain the urban rural divide.

## CONCLUSION

Why do people in rural areas trust the police more than people in urban areas? For starters, experience matters! Because the regression models show a significant drop in coefficient on “Urban”, means that the negative experiences with the performance of the police are accounting for some of the differences in trust between urban and rural areas. More specifically, adding “Victimization” to the regression decreases the value of “Urban” by 19% on its own and “Police Bribery” decreases the value of “Urban” by 5% on its own. Together they account for about 22% of the effect. From these results, it is also clear that being a victim of a crime has a far stronger effect in explaining the urban rural gap in trust than police bribing.

In order to make changes that would result in higher levels of trust in the police it would be prudent to improve the quality of police work. More specifically, cracking down on crime and insecurity is a viable way to improve trust in urban areas, because being a victim of crime is a strong factor in eroding trust. Moreover, taking action to combat police corruption can also be an important practice. Overall, through examining trust in the police from the lens of a citizen’s personal experiences, it becomes clear that the quality of police work and the way police interact with citizens while on the job needs to improve before citizens can develop a more trusting relationship with them.

The results of this study bring up some possibilities for further investigation on trust in the police in Latin America. What other factors about living in an urban or rural area might result

in differences in trust in the police? To begin, the hypothesis states that it is negative experience with the performance of the police that causes lower levels of trust in urban areas; however, I was unable to test positive experiences with the performance of the police. Positive experiences with police performance likely raise trust. For example, if I were able to test the effect on trust of a police officer addressing a reported crime or resolving a disturbance, perhaps we would see how experiences positively impact trust. Unfortunately, accessible and representative data on positive experiences with the police is not available. Similarly, it would be interesting to see how other measures of negative experiences with the performance of the police affect trust in Latin America, such as being arrested or fined by the police. These additional measures of negative experiences can potentially further support the hypothesis. Finally, questions of trust in institutions lend themselves well to a qualitative approach with more open-ended questions for participants, because issues of values like trust often cannot be explained fully through a series of multiple choice questions as they appear in a survey like LAPOP. Moreover, issues of trust are heavily cultural, so more nuanced in-depth analysis through interviews would supplement the use of survey data well.

To begin, an investigation could be done using interactions with the same data. An interaction of living in an urban area and being a victim of a crime will show us if these two factors compounded make one less likely to trust the police than someone who is simply from an urban area. Having these interactions run for both urban and rural areas can tell us whether being a victim of a crime or being solicited for a bribe have the same impact on trust in urban and rural areas despite trust in urban areas being lower overall. Also, doing a case study with more focused information on the criminal justice system in a particular Latin American country could create more politically and culturally informed results. It is hard to go into specifics on criminal justice

policy in Latin America as a whole because these factors vary in each country. A suggestion for case studies are Mexico and Peru. Mexico would be a good case study due to the abundance of information and resources their government provides. Peru would also be interesting to investigate because it is the only country where rural residents have lower trust in the police than urban residents. An in-depth case study on one country which looks at both specific dynamics of that country's police force, coupled with the survey data I use in this investigation, could tell us more about the causes of trust in the police in urban and rural settings.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: Wealth Index Components and Cronbach's Alpha

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Corresponding Meaning</b>	<b>Observations</b>	<b>Alpha</b>
r1	Television in the home	192,105	0.7865
r3	Refrigerator in the home	192,100	0.7639
r4a	Cellular phone in the home	181,639	0.8000
r6	Washing machine in the home	192,106	0.7690
r7	Microwave oven in the home	187,719	0.7702
r12	Drinking water in the home	192,095	0.7793
r14	Home has an indoor bathroom	184,665	0.7621
r15	Computer in the home	189,043	0.7792
<b>Test Scale:</b>			<b>0.7991</b>