

Understanding support for tough-on-crime policies in Latin America: The cases of Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras

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Abstract

This article examines tough-on-crime strategies in El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico. These three countries have been plagued by gangs and organized crime-related violence. Scholars have written about the consequences of iron fist strategies, which have resulted in increasing levels of violence. This article seeks to fill a gap in the scholarly literature by examining what factors influence perceptions about tough-on-crime strategies, using survey data in the cases of Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras. The article finds that fear is a key factor that influences support for *mano dura* policies.

KEYWORDS

crime, El Salvador, gangs, Honduras, *mano dura*, Mexico, tough-on-crime

Este artículo examina las estrategias de mano dura en El Salvador, Honduras y México. Estos tres países han estado plagados de pandillas y violencia relacionada con el crimen organizado. Los académicos han escrito sobre las consecuencias de las estrategias de mano dura, que han resultado en altos índices de violencia. Este artículo intenta llenar un vacío en la literatura académica al examinar los factores que influyen en las percepciones sobre las estrategias de mano dura, utilizando datos de encuestas en los casos de México, El Salvador y Honduras. El artículo demuestra que el miedo es un factor clave que influye en el apoyo a las políticas de mano dura.

本文分析了萨尔瓦多、洪都拉斯和墨西哥的严厉打击犯罪战略。长期以来，这三国受到犯罪集团和有组织犯罪暴力的困

扰。学者已研究了铁拳战略的结果, 该战略已导致更程度的暴力。本文使用墨西哥、萨尔瓦多和洪都拉斯的调查数据, 分析哪些因素会影响对严厉打击犯罪战略的感知, 进而填补学术文献空白。本文发现, 恐惧是影响“对铁拳 (*mano dura*) 政策的支持”的一个关键因素。

INTRODUCTION

Countries in Latin America have invested billions of dollars trying to combat drug trafficking and organized crime. The consequence of the war on crime has been that criminal organizations are fighting with the government and among each other for control of resources and territory, which has led to escalations in violence and contributed to increasing levels of citizen insecurity (Carpenter, 2014; Watt & Martínez, 2012). Some scholars maintain that tough-on-crime strategies have contributed to crime and violence in Latin America (Rodríguez-Pinzón & Rodrigues, 2020; Watt & Martínez, 2012). This article seeks to fill a void in the academic literature by analyzing which factors influence perceptions about tough-on-crime strategies, using survey data in the cases of El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico, since these three countries have implemented *mano dura* (iron fist) policies to combat organized crime-related violence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several Latin American governments have implemented tough-on-crime strategies to combat the increasing number of criminal actors and violence (Hume, 2007; Trejo & Ley, 2018; Ungar, 2008; Wolf, 2017). Numerous scholarly works analyze the consequences of *mano dura* initiatives in Central America and Mexico (Bruneau et al., 2011; Cruz, 2014; Rodgers, 2006; Rodrigues et al., 2017; Wolf, 2011b). Scholars maintain that criminal groups, such as gangs in Honduras and El Salvador, are often stigmatized and treated as the enemy, an idea which helps politicians gain points among the electorate (Holland, 2013; Van Damme, 2017). For example, Sonja Wolf (2017) looks at the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and their emphasis on human rights. She finds that the government's tough-on-crime strategies hindered these organizations. Finally, many scholars are critical of *mano dura* policies because there have been human-rights abuses committed by the police and military (Dammert & Salazar, 2009; Isacson, 2001; Wolf, 2011a).

Scholars conducting survey research in the Americas highlight that age, personal experience with crime, the likelihood of victimization, and perceptions of crime are relevant variables that affect whether one supports tough-on-crime policies. First, people who are older tend to be less supportive of these policies (Price et al., 2019). It is important to highlight that the elderly are less likely to be victims of violence, particularly gang and organized crime-related violence, than youth living in marginalized communities (Price et al., 2019). Second, and intricately linked with the first point, research reveals that people are more likely to support tough-on-crime strategies if they believe that it is possible that they could become victims of crime (Miller et al., 1986). Third, some scholars note that personal experiences and high crime rates alone are not the only driving factors, since perceptions of crime influenced by the media can affect whether someone supports tough-on-crime strategies (Krause, 2014).

Furthermore, quantitative studies highlight the effects of education on opinions regarding crime and violence (Price et al., 2019). Some scholars maintain that people who are more educated are more tolerant of disliked groups, which is the category into which gangs and other criminal actors fit (Bobo & Licari, 1989). Yet, other experts maintain that people are more tolerant if they do not feel that it is very likely that their safety will be threatened. Therefore, it

is important to analyze the nature of crime when trying to understand the levels of tolerance and the role of education regarding support for tough-on-crime policies (Price et al., 2019).

THEORETICAL APPROACH: FEAR AS THE DRIVING FORCE

The three countries examined in this article have a *mano dura* triad, which consists of three elements, (1) the presence of powerful criminal actors; (2) high levels of criminal violence; and (3) fear among the populace. Many scholars have studied the role of powerful criminal actors (Cantor, 2014; Shirk & Wallman, 2015; Trejo & Ley, 2018). For instance, Honduras and El Salvador are home to the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street gangs, some of the most powerful in the Western Hemisphere (Cruz, 2010a; Gutiérrez Rivera, 2011; Wolf, 2010). Honduras also has some of the most powerful transnational organized crime groups in the Americas, such as the Sinaloa Cartel (Bosworth, 2010; Bruneau, 2005). In addition, Mexico has gangs, a plethora of criminal actors, and an increasing number of transnational organized crime groups that partake in a diverse array of illicit activities, including drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, money laundering, and oil theft (Shirk & Wallman, 2015; Watt & Martínez, 2012).

Scholars have also studied tough-on-crime policies and the high levels of violence in El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico, which are home to some of the most violent cities in the world (Calderón et al., 2019; UNODC, 2012, 2013). In this article, I focus on the importance of fear, in an effort to build on the previous scholarly works, which examine the role of criminal actors and violence (Cruz, 2008; Dammert, 2007; Shirk & Wallman, 2015; Wade, 2019). The central proposition of this article is that fear drives support for tough-on-crime policies. Fear can be a result of personal experience, as well as what someone sees on television or hears from neighbors, family, and friends. High levels of fear among the populace result in citizens being willing to take drastic measures to reduce crime and violence, at whatever cost necessary.

One of the main theoretical arguments of this article is that populist leaders invoke the use of punitive policies to respond to fear among the populace and address high levels of insecurity (Hough, 2002; Martínez Barahona & Linares Lejarraga, 2011). Populist leaders from the ideological left and right both employ tough-on-crime policies designed to combat organized crime groups, gangs, and the diverse criminal actors operating in Central America and Mexico (Bonner, 2019; Chevigny, 2003; Swanson, 2013). In the case of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, the former mayor of San Salvador who assumed the presidency in June 2019, ran for president on a platform of improving security, combating gangs, and decreasing corruption. President Bukele vowed not to negotiate with gangs, unlike former president Mauricio Funes (2009–2014), whose administration had a clandestine truce between MS-13 and the 18th Street gang as part of an effort to reduce violence (Cruz & Durán-Martínez, 2016; Dudley, 2013; Katz & Amaya, 2015). Furthermore, Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a member of the left-wing National Regeneration Movement (Movimiento Regeneración Nacional—Morena) party, criticized the previous administrations for their security strategies and the high levels of organized crime-related violence. Yet, one of the first things that President López Obrador did upon assuming office was to create the National Guard, a militarized unit that consists of the police and the military, to combat organized crime and violence (Felbab-Brown, 2019; Speck, 2019). It suggests that politicians who do not focus on combating organized crime and violence through the implementation of tough-on-crime policies will not be elected. In sum, this article argues that leaders from both the ideological left and the right are tapping into the fear and desire for tough-on-crime policies to combat organized crime, gangs, and violence.

Moreover, this article maintains that there are several determinants of tough-on-crime policies. The political science literature shows that civil society and voters play an important role in any functioning democracy (Blaney & Pasha, 1993; Booth & Richard, 1998; Foley & Edwards,

1996; Newton, 2001). People can pressure politicians to elevate issues on the national security agenda and to pass laws to address public policy issues. For example, citizens in the U.S. state of California played a key role in the passage of the three-strike laws. In 1992, Mike Reynolds and his family, who lived in Fresno, suffered a tremendous tragedy when two men killed their daughter, who was home for a wedding. The men who approached Reynolds' daughter and shot her had a long criminal history (Zimring, 1996). This tragic event led Reynolds, a wedding photographer, to push for tougher crime laws. Yet, his efforts did not gain traction until the kidnapping of Polly Klaas, a young girl living in a quiet neighborhood in Petaluma, California. The media covered this story, which had a tragic ending with Richard Allen Davis killing the girl. People around the country became outraged when they learned that Davis had prior criminal convictions, including kidnapping (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2001; Forquer, 1995).

Fear turned to anger, and citizens called for politicians to act. Reynolds received thousands of signatures, and California passed the three-strike law. It would appear that fear, panic, and the media frenzy led law makers to implement tough-on-crime policies. The Bill Clinton administration passed the 1994 Crime Bill, which resulted in people convicted of three felonies being sentenced to 25 years to life in prison (Shinbein, 1996; Taibbi, 2013). This law received widespread support from both Republicans and Democrats (Zimring, 1996) and contributed to a proliferation in the prison population (Austin et al., 1999; Benekos & Merlo, 1995; McCollum, 1994).

The evolution of tough-on-crime strategies in the United States sheds light on the theoretical framework utilized in this article. Citizens in many countries in the Americas are demanding that politicians respond to crime and violence through tough-on-crime strategies. Countries such as Argentina saw the election of Mauricio Macri, who ran on a tough-on-crime platform, even though the country does not have the same levels of criminal activity and violence present in El Salvador, Honduras, or Mexico (Cutrona, 2017). People are desperate and want to reduce crime and violence by whatever means necessary.

The following subsections discuss the cases of El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico, and trends in crime and violence. I emphasize how politicians have utilized fear during campaigns focused on the need for tough-on-crime policies. Once in office, politicians have deployed the military and utilized the police to combat organized crime and violence.

El Salvador

The El Salvadoran government has implemented tough-on-crime policies to increase security and reduce gang-related violence (Ribando Seelke, 2012; Sullivan, 1997). President Francisco Flores (1994–2004) of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party applied *mano dura* policies to combat gangs. The Flores government elevated gangs on the security agenda, using discourse that demonized these criminal groups (Cruz, 2010a; Hume, 2007; Van Der Borgh & Savenije, 2015). President Antonio Saca, the successor to Francisco Flores, recognized that the Salvadoran population wanted to eliminate gangs and reduce gang-related violence (2019; Wolf, 2012). He learned the lessons from his predecessors and ran a political campaign focusing on *mano dura* strategies to gain votes among the electorate, who wished to increase security in the country. As a result, Saca launched a plan known as *super mano dura* to reduce gang activity by arresting and incarcerating gang members (De la Torre & Álvarez, 2011; Hume, 2007).

The Salvadoran government focused on arresting gang members (Cruz, 1999, 2007; Pérez, 2013). The police stopped gang members on the street, often profiling individuals who lived in neighborhoods with a large gang presence. Law enforcement targeted youth perceived to be in gangs, based on the clothes that these individuals wore (Brenneman, 2013; Cruz, 2010a). The first thing that the police often did upon stopping a young person was look for gang-related tattoos, since having these symbols makes it very difficult for someone to deny affiliation

with these criminal organizations (Rosen & Cruz, 2018). The Salvadoran police arrested, and rearrested, youth from marginalized neighborhoods with large gang presences. The increasing arrest rates enabled politicians to market the “successes” against the Mara Salvatrucha gang. Yet, experts note that jails became a revolving door, since the police continued to arrest the same people multiple times (Cruz, 2010a). While these numbers can help improve the statistics that law enforcement can report to the Salvadoran public, such strategies did not reduce violence or stop gang-related activity (Dudley, 2010).

The tough-on-crime tactics resulted in spikes in the prison population and helped gangs organize better their criminal endeavors (Cruz, 2010a; Rosen & Cruz, 2018). The prison population increased from 10,907 in 2002—a rate of 183 per 100,000 people—to 19,814 in 2008—a rate of 324 per 100,000 inhabitants. By 2018, El Salvador had 39,642 prisoners, which is a rate of 617 per 100,000 inhabitants. As of June 2018, Salvadoran prisons operated at 215.2% of capacity (ICPR, 2020a) and served as epicenters for gang-related activity. Authorities separated rival gangs to avoid violence between these different criminal organizations. Cruz (2010a) notes that this strategy had unintended consequences, since gang members from different cliques throughout the country utilized the prison system to strengthen their organizational capabilities and improve their criminal operations while behind bars.

Moreover, the tough-on-crime strategies have affected levels of violence in El Salvador (Fogelbach, 2010; UNODC, 2013). The deployment of the military and police to combat gangs resulted in the gangs fighting not only with each other but also with the government. In 2015, El Salvador surpassed Honduras as the most violent country in the world, with a murder rate of more than 100 per 100,000 inhabitants. The country has seen more violence in recent years than during the civil war (Valencia, 2015; The Guardian, 2015).

Honduras

The Honduran state is home to powerful gangs and organized crime groups that have contributed to crime and violence in the country (Gutiérrez Rivera, 2011; Ungar, 2008). Ricardo Maduro, the President of Honduras between 2002 and 2006, argued that *mano dura* initiatives needed to be implemented to combat gangs such as MS-13 and its archrival, the 18th Street gang. The Maduro administration changed the laws to enable law enforcement officials to stop people suspected of being gang members. President Maduro argued that the government had to implement these new strategies if Honduras wanted to decrease crime and violence (Van Damme, 2017). These policies led to the police profiling youth living in poor neighborhoods and helped increase the levels of stigmatization felt by people living in marginalized neighborhoods beleaguered by crime and violence (Rivera Gutiérrez, 2012; Van Damme, 2017).

Tough-on-crime policies have continued in recent years. Juan Orlando Hernández won the 2013 election and stressed the need to combat the criminal groups operating in the country. The Hernández administration militarized the conflict by creating the Military Police of Public Order (*Policía Militar del Orden Público*—PMOP), an organization designed to patrol the streets, arrest gang members, and reduce violence (Forde, 2014; Main, 2014; Pérez, 2015). The Hernández administration touted the decreasing homicide rates as testament to the fact that the security strategies are working, but critics criticized police misconduct and human-rights abuses (Cawley, 2013; Cruz, 2010b; Human Rights Watch, 2011).

Tough-on-crime policies have also resulted in increases in the prison population. In 2000, Honduras incarcerated 11,500 people, which translates to a rate of 184 per 100,000 inhabitants. The number of prisoners has increased in recent years. In 2016, Honduras had 17,253 prisoners—a rate of 200 per 100,000. As of September 2018, the prison system had a capacity of 10,600 inmates, but it was operating at 193.5% of capacity (ICPR, 2020b). Today, most prisons in Honduras are self-governed and serve as centers of crime. Prisons controlled by gangs

and criminal groups continue to partake in illicit activities while behind bars (Carter, 2014; Dudley, 2010; Paniagua, 2019).

While the Hernández government has had some successes reducing homicides, the Honduran state is still beleaguered by high levels of corruption and an intricate relationship between the state and organized crime. For example, in November 2018, U.S. authorities arrested the brother of the Honduran president for drug trafficking, and he has been convicted in a New York court (Ernst & Malkin, 2018). The intricate ties between the president, his family, elites, and drug traffickers have shed light on the corruption plaguing the Honduran political system (Bosworth, 2010; Dudley, 2015). Despite the systematic corruption among government institutions, the Hernández administration is doubling down on tough-on-crime strategies and vowing to increase security in the country.

Mexico

Mexico has a long history of drug trafficking and organized crime (Astorga, 2003). The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) dominated the political landscape in Mexico's federal system between 1929 and 2000 (Bailey, 2014; Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009; Watt & Martínez, 2012). The PRI had an intricate relationship with organized crime during its time in power. Mexico had fewer criminal groups during this period when compared to today, which made it easier for the PRI to negotiate with them (Shelley, 2001; Snyder & Durán Martínez, 2009; Trejo & Ley, 2018). Collusion between the state and organized crime in Mexico limited the amount of violence in the country, because the Mexican state served as a protector for the variety of criminal groups operating throughout the country (Jones, 2016). This dynamic evolved during the 1980s, as the PRI began to lose control at the state level and eventually lost power at the federal level in 2000, with the election of Vicente Fox Quesada of the National Action Party (PAN) (Edmonds-Poli & Shirk, 2020; Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009).

President Felipe Calderón initiated a war on drugs upon assuming office in 2006, after he defeated Andrés Manuel López Obrador in a highly contested victory that led protestors to occupy the central plaza in Mexico City (Lawson, 2007; Rosen & Zepeda, 2016). President Calderón pledged to combat organized crime and sent the Mexican military to his home state of Michoacán (Astorga & Shirk, 2010; Edmonds-Poli & Shirk, 2020). Critics of the Calderón administration maintain that deploying the military set a dangerous precedent, since there should be a distinction between the military and the police and their areas of responsibility (Astorga, 2015; Castañeda, 2010; Watt & Martínez, 2012). While the Calderón government attempted to reform the police (Bailey, 2014; Creechan, 2012; Davis, 2006), it relied on the military to capture the leaders of major criminal networks and marketed these victories to the public to demonstrate that this administration was winning the war on drugs and organized crime (Chabat et al., 2009; Rosen & Zepeda Martínez, 2015).

President Calderón's fight against drug trafficking and organized crime increased violence in certain zones as the government utilized the military to intercept drugs, disrupt criminal organizations, and capture the leaders of the groups (Bagley & Rosen, 2015; Carpenter, 2012; Watt & Martínez, 2012). Ciudad Juárez, located in the border state of Chihuahua, became the most dangerous city in terms of homicide rates in Mexico between 2008 and 2011. In 2010, Juárez had 3,746 homicides, which translates to a homicide rate of 262 per 100,000 people (Calderón et al., 2019; CFR, 2019). Drug-related violence in the country soared from a rate of 8.1 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2007, to 23.5 per 100,000 in 2011 (CFR, 2019; INEGI, 2020). In 2012, Acapulco, located in Guerrero, became the most violent city in the country, with a homicide rate of 184 per 100,000 people (Calderón et al., 2019). By the end of the Calderón government, Mexico had more than 100,000 drug-related deaths, and drug trafficking and organized crime continued unabated (Calderón et al., 2019; Grillo, 2013; Heine et al., 2015).

President Enrique Peña Nieto of the PRI (2012–2018) promised to change the failed drug war tactics. At the same time that Peña Nieto wanted to reform the police, he deployed the military throughout Mexico to capture the leaders of drug trafficking organizations (Rosen & Zepeda, 2016). Violence decreased during the first 2 years of the Peña Nieto government but climbed during the rest of this administration. Acapulco remained the most violent city in terms of homicide rates from 2013 through 2016, with a rate of 139 homicides per 100,000 in 2016. Tijuana surpassed Acapulco as the most violent city, with rates of 83 and 115 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2017 and 2018, respectively. By the end of the Peña Nieto administration, Mexico had more than 120,000 drug-related deaths (Calderón et al., 2019; Rodrigues et al., 2017).

The tough-on-crime policies in Mexico have resulted in a spike in the prison population and have had major consequences for the prison system. By 2014, Mexico had a prison population rate of 214 per 100,000 inhabitants (ICPR, 2020c). The high levels of overcrowding have resulted in riots, as criminal groups fight for control of illicit market operations and territory both inside and outside of the prison gates. Prisons in Mexico fail to rehabilitate inmates and operate as criminal caldrons (Aguilar, 2006; Azaola, 2007; Muñoz, 2007). Powerful criminal organizations run many prisons in Mexico and threaten guards who attempt to stop their criminal activities (Olivero, 2014; Rosen & Brienen, 2015; Ungar, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

This article uses data from the 2016–2017 Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP, 2016–2017a) survey, conducted by Vanderbilt University in Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras among voting age adults. LAPOP utilizes multi-stage cluster sampling based on region, urban and rural areas, and the size of municipalities. The survey sample for Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras includes 1,563, 1,551, and 1,560 respondents, respectively (for more information, see LAPOP, 2016–2017b). I ran a logistic regression model using the 2016–2017 individual country survey data for El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico to determine the factors that influence one's opinions about whether the penalties for crime need to increase. The dependent variable, *penalties for crime need to increase*, is a Likert Scale coded one for “disagree” and seven for “agree.” I have recoded this variable into a dummy variable, where zero equals “disagree” and one equals “agree.”¹ I ran this model, described in more detail below, to test my theoretical hypothesis, which is that fear plays more of a role than victimization. As noted above, the academic literature suggests that the perception of whether people believe that they are more likely to have their safety threatened influences their level of support for tough-on-crime policies (Price et al., 2019).

The control variables are *age*, *urban*, *education*, *monthly household income*, *victim of crime in the last 12 months*, *fear of being a homicide victim*, *ideology*, and *trust in the police*.² The age variable is from 18 to 93 in El Salvador, 18 to 86 in Honduras, and 18 to 88 in Mexico. Urban is a dummy variable coded as *urban* and *rural*, while education is from none to 18 or more years of schooling. Monthly household income for El Salvador is from no income to more than U.S.\$785 per month. Monthly household income for Mexico is from no income to more than \$11,050 Mexican pesos per month. For Honduras, monthly household income is from no income to more than 15,600 lempiras per month. *Victim of crime in the last 12 months* is a dummy variable coded *yes* and *no*, while the variable measuring *one's fear of being a homicide victim* is coded one for “A lot of fear,” two for “Some fear,” three for “Little fear,” and four for “No fear at all.” Moreover, *ideology* is coded one for *left* and ten for *right*. I did not recode the ideology variable, which is consistent with other scholars in the discipline (Polga-Hecimovich, 2019), since coding the variables *left* and *right* misses people who are in the ideological center. Finally, *trust in the national police* is from one, “Not at all,” to seven, which represents “A lot.” I controlled for trust in the police as a proxy variable for *trust in government institutions*. Research

indicates that people who have higher levels of trust in the police are more likely to support the government and institutions (Bailey & Dammert, 2006; Cruz, 2009b), which, in turn, could influence support for tough-on-crime strategies.

I ran the logistic regression model using Stata 16.1. The LAPOP team recommends using the `svy` command to compute weighted statistics and the standard errors in the model.³ I tested the model for goodness of fit, specifically running the Hosmer–Lemeshow test to determine the *F*-adjusted statistic, since research indicates that it is most appropriate when using survey data (Archer & Lemeshow, 2006).⁴ In addition, I tested for model specification using the `linktest`, which reveals that the model is properly specified (Hosmer, 2002). Finally, the three countries examined in the model have a mean variation inflation factor (VIF) of 1.24 or less, indicating that there are no issues with multicollinearity (Alin, 2010).

RESULTS

What have been the consequences of gangs and gang-related violence on public opinion? Mexicans feel very insecure and support tough-on-crime policies. The LAPOP (2016–2017a) survey reveals that 31.88% of Mexicans said that they had been a victim of crime during the last year. The data indicates that 17.69% of the population responded that they had “a lot of fear” of being a victim of a homicide. Citizens were willing to take drastic measures to combat crime; 54.85% of Mexicans responded that they “agree strongly” that the penalties for crime need to increase. Nearly half of the population, 48.27%, responded that a military takeover of the state is justified when crime is high, while 50.27% of the survey contended that a coup is justified when corruption is high.

Moreover, the descriptive statistics indicate that El Salvadorans feel insecure and are in favor of increasing the penalties for people who commit crimes. The survey reveals that 35.71% of El Salvadorans have “a lot of fear” of being a victim of murder, while 20.89% have “some fear.” The data also show that El Salvadorans are willing to take drastic measures to combat insecurity and implement tough-on-crime policies; 52.20% of the population agrees strongly that the penalties for crime need to increase. When asked whether a “coup is justified when crime is high,” 34.53% of the population contended that a military takeover is justified, which is perplexing considering that the country has had a long history of civil war and violence (Wade, 2016; Wood, 2003).

While the number of gang members incarcerated has increased, and homicides have declined, Hondurans continue to feel unsafe and are willing to take extreme measures to reduce crime (Beeton & Watts, 2016). The LAPOP (2016–2017a) survey indicates that Hondurans feel very unsafe. When asked about their level of fear of being a murder victim, 32.3% responded that they had “a lot of fear,” while 20.2% contended that they had “some fear.” The survey also shows that 21.6% of Hondurans had been a crime victim over the last year. Moreover, 59.61% of survey participants maintained that they had avoided leaving their homes at night because of the fear of crime. The survey data also show that 64.35% of the population “agrees strongly” that the penalties for crime need to increase, while only 4.68% “disagree strongly.” In fact, 37.45% of Hondurans said that a coup through a military takeover of the state was justified when crime was high, while 35.35% believed that a coup was justified when corruption was high.

DISCUSSION

The descriptive statistics and Table 1 reveal the findings of the logistic regression model. The most important finding is that *fear of being a murder victim* is statistically significant at the 95%

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics

	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
<i>Mexico</i>					
Support tough-on-crime	1,535	0.808	0.394	0	1
Age	1,563	40.6	16.27	18	88
Urban	1,563	1.20	0.400	1	2
Education	1,553	9.38	4.28	0	18
Monthly household income	1,384	7.33	5.07	0	16
Victim of crime in last 12 months	1,562	1.68	0.466	1	2
Fear of being homicide victim	1,560	2.59	1.05	1	4
Ideology	1,397	4.97	2.63	1	10
Trust in the national police	1,543	2.89	1.80	1	7
<i>El Salvador</i>					
Support tough on crime	1,525	0.797	0.402	0	1
Age	1,551	40.2	16.7	18	93
Urban	1,551	1.37	0.482	1	2
Education	1,538	8.91	4.68	0	18
Monthly household income	1,367	7.90	5.00	0	16
Victim of crime in last 12 months	1,546	1.77	0.422	1	2
Fear of being homicide victim	1,546	2.28	1.15	1	4
Ideology	1,383	5.63	2.73	1	10
Trust in the national police	1,543	4.31	1.87	1	7
<i>Honduras</i>					
Support tough-on-crime	1,540	0.854	0.353	0	1
Age	1,554	38.2	16.0	18	86
Urban	1,560	1.46	0.499	1	2
Education	1,525	7.63	4.39	0	18
Monthly household income	1,321	7.42	5.29	0	16
Victim of crime in last 12 months	1,558	1.78	0.412	1	2
Fear of being homicide victim	1,557	2.40	1.18	1	4
Ideology	1,331	5.80	3.13	1	10
Trust in the national police	1,545	3.94	2.08	1	7

Note: Min. and Max. stand for minimum and maximum.

Source: Author's elaboration, with data from LAPOP (2016–2017a, 2016–2017b).

confidence interval for all three countries, while *being a victim of a crime in the last 12 months* is not statistically significant for any of the cases. For every one-unit increase in *fear of being a homicide victim* in the case of El Salvador, we expect to see a -0.375 shift in the log-odds of the dependent variable, holding all other variables constant. Therefore, it appears that people who are less fearful of being a homicide victim are less likely to support the need for the penalties for crime to increase. Finally, the case of El Salvador shows that fear influences support for the need to increase the penalties for crime, independent of ideology.

These regression results could help explain how politicians exploit the levels of fear among the population, as well as the consequences for politicians who do not campaign on *mano*

dura platforms. Political actors tap into fear by giving speeches demonizing criminal actors and touting the need to implement tough-on-crime strategies. Politicians who fail to focus on the need to increase security through drastic measures can be labeled as “soft” or “weak” on crime. Citizens can vote out politicians that they believe are not willing to fight criminal groups. Not all voters are aware of the collateral consequences of tough-on-crime policies, not only on the prison system, but on the overall levels of violence, enabling politicians to focus on fear campaigns that emphasize the need to take drastic measures to reduce the power of criminal groups, despite human-rights abuses in the three countries examined in this study (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Isacson, 2001).

While I focus on how fear is the key driver in support for tough-on-crime policies, it is important to recognize that fear can also be stoked by the media. Scholars have written about the role of the news media and crime reporting (Dammert & Malone, 2003; Holland, 2013; Krause, 2014). Some note that exposure to crime news can have different effects on support for authoritarian measures to combat crime, a point that should be examined in other countries and in future studies (Krause, 2014).

The control variables also reveal interesting findings. First, ideology is statistically significant in the models for Honduras and Mexico at the 95% confidence interval, but not in the case of El Salvador. It appears that people who are farther right on the ideological scale are more likely to support tough-on-crime policies, which is consistent with the scholarly literature (Holland, 2013) that shows that people who are more conservative tend to support tough-on-crime policies. Second, the urban versus rural divide is only statistically significant in the case of Mexico, where it appears that people who live in rural areas believe that the penalties for crime need to increase. As organized crime groups are displaced because of the war on drugs, they can relocate to rural areas of Mexico, where the state apparatus is weaker. The lack of state presence and the rule of law in rural areas is something that should be explored further, since this factor could affect one's perceptions of insecurity and the need to implement tough-on-crime policies. Third, age is statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval only in the case of El Salvador. For every one-unit increase in age, we anticipate a -0.012 shift in the log-odds of the dependent variable, holding all other variables constant (Table 2). It appears that people who are older are less likely to support tough-on-crime strategies, which is consistent with the previous scholarly studies (Price et al., 2019). It is something that should be explored in future quantitative studies.

Finally, *trust in the police* is statistically significant in the cases of El Salvador and Honduras at the 95% confidence level in model two. For every one-unit increase in *trust in the police*, we expect to see a 0.156 increase in the log-odds of the dependent variable for the case of El Salvador. In Honduras, for every one-unit increase in the *trust in the police*, we anticipate a 0.085 increase in the log-odds of the dependent variable, holding all other variables constant. Thus, it appears that people who have higher levels of trust in the national police are more likely to support the need to increase the penalties for crime. Many scholars have written about the role of the police and different strategies that can be used to maintain law and order (Alda, 2014; Fruhling, 2003; Ungar, 2011), and the findings of this regression model confirm my hypothesis that people who have more support for the police are more likely to be in favor of the implementation of tough-on-crime policies. While the police in many Latin American countries, including the three countries analyzed in this paper, have been plagued by corruption and human rights abuses, politicians still use law enforcement entities to implement *mano dura* policies (Cruz, 2009a, 2010c). Yet, the lack of trust in law enforcement could lead people to take the law into their own hands. More research is needed on the relationship between organized crime, violence, and the support for vigilante groups versus law enforcement (Krause, 2014; Nivette, 2016; Zizumbo-Colunga, 2017).

TABLE 2 Factors associated with whether penalties for crime should increase

Variables	Mexico		El Salvador		Honduras	
	Coef.	t stat.	Coef.	t stat.	Coef.	t stat.
Age	-0.007 (0.005)	-1.32	-0.012** (0.005)	-2.21	-0.003 (0.005)	-0.59
Urban	0.567*** (0.198)	2.86	0.055 (0.201)	0.27	0.136 (0.230)	0.59
Education	-0.044** (0.020)	-2.17	-0.001 (0.025)	-0.04	0.002 (0.031)	0.06
Monthly household income	-0.014 (0.016)	-0.91	-0.005 (0.025)	-0.19	-0.008 (0.023)	-0.38
Victim of crime in last 12 months	0.091 (0.158)	0.57	-0.091 (0.224)	-0.41	0.189 (0.214)	0.88
Fear of being homicide victim	-0.177** (0.077)	-2.31	-0.375*** (0.069)	-5.45	-0.179** (0.078)	-2.29
Ideology	0.075** (0.030)	2.55	-0.001 (0.025)	-0.06	0.073** (0.029)	2.55
Trust in the national police	0.062 (0.046)	1.36	0.156*** (0.039)	4.04	0.085** (0.038)	2.25
Constant	1.383** (0.533)	2.59	2.384*** (0.646)	3.69	1.170* (0.649)	1.80
F-adjusted (Prob > F)	0.75 (0.658)		1.25 (0.286)		0.90 (0.531)	
Observations	1,230		1,198		1,117	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .1$.

Source: Author's elaboration, with data from LAPOP (2016–2017a, 2016–2017b).

CONCLUSION

This article seeks to fill a gap in the literature by examining factors that contribute to the support for tough-on-crime policies. While there are many works discussing *mano dura* policies (Dammert & Salazar, 2009; Rodgers, 2009; Trejo & Ley, 2018; Wolf, 2017), and the relationship between the news, crime, and support for authoritarian crime policies (Krause, 2014), there is a need to analyze why such policies remain popular among the public despite research showing that such strategies have caused increases in violence. Moreover, these tough-on-crime strategies fail to resolve many of the structural issues, such as corruption and the lack of transparency. The regression results suggest that fear drives support for these policies, which is consistent with other studies in other works that have examined why *mano dura* policies occur in countries that have lower levels of violence than the three cases examined in this article (Cutrona, 2017). Finally, the notion that people who are more conservative will support tough-on-crime policies is consistent with the academic literature (Dagan & Teles, 2014; Holland, 2013).

While this article is an effort to examine this phenomenon, more research is needed on other case studies in Latin America to help quantify the different factors that result in support for

these issues. Hopefully, this article will start the conversation among scholars and can help set a future research agenda for academics studying *mano dura* policies in Latin America.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The recode is as follows: recode aoj22new (1/ 4= 0) (5/7 = 1), gen(tough). I re-ran the model with four in the first grouping, and then in the second grouping. It was suggested that I place four in this first grouping and run the model both ways, but it is important to note that there is not a theoretical or empirical foundation for where to code four on a 7-point scale. Scholars discuss the advantages and disadvantages of collapsing variables (Murad et al., 2003; Pohlman & Leitner, 2003).
- ² I originally controlled for sex, but this variable did not produce statistically significant results in any of the models.
- ³ LAPOP indicates that the svyset command should be as follows: svyset upm [pw = wt], strata (estratopri). For more information, see LAPOP (2016–2017b). The svy command provides linearized coefficients and standard errors.
- ⁴ It is consistent with research conducted by other scholars in the field (e.g., Cruz & Durán-Martínez, 2016).

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