

Class and the Development of Trust in Police in Latin America*

Tara Slough[†]

Carolina Torreblanca[‡]

June 11, 2025

Abstract

Trust in police is a critical input in the co-production of public security. We show that the positive socioeconomic status (SES)-trust in police gradient observed in the US does not generalize to Latin America. In 146 surveys spanning 20 countries, we find that trust in police is weakly and negatively correlated with SES—a fact that neither regional nor subject-matter experts anticipated. We propose that rich citizens are more likely to interpret everyday experiences as signals about the police. Because bad experiences like crime victimization and bribe solicitation are more common in Latin America than in the US, rich citizens’s tendency to interpret poor security outcomes as signals of police untrustworthiness leads to a lower trust–SES gradient. In our account, cross-country differences in the trust–SES gradient are driven by differences in policing outcomes coupled with universal class-based differences in people’s readiness to see the world around them as signals about police.

*We thank Sofía Berrospi, Alex Dean, Dorothy Kronick, Beatriz Magaloni, Pablo Querubín, Zara Riaz, Arturas Rozenas, David Stasavage and audiences at the Penn Development Research Initiative Crime and Policing in Comparative Perspective Conference and APSA for excellent comments.

[†]Assistant Professor, New York University, tara.slough@nyu.edu.

[‡]Postdoctoral Fellow, PDRI-DevLab, University of Pennsylvania, catba@sas.upenn.edu.

Local public services rely on inputs from citizens and service providers alike (Ostrom, 1996). Victims and bystanders report information to the police (Levine and Fisher, 1984); parents bolster teachers' efforts through support for student learning (Ostrom, 1996); and participatory governance can inform the design of infrastructure (Tendler, 1997). However, the provision and quality of these services can vary substantially across communities, often reflecting differences in citizen-provider relationships influenced by citizens' characteristics (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995).

Improving service provision is a pressing objective in the diverse settings of low- and middle-income countries (Grossman and Slough, 2022). Nevertheless, characterizations of these citizen-provider relationships, which produce critical inputs that shape the quality of service provision, draw heavily from experiences in the United States (e.g., Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Policy interventions to improve service provision in the US, in turn, are advocated elsewhere. However, if baseline features of citizen-provider relationships in a target context differ from those in the US, the adoption of a common intervention may fail to achieve similar results.

Policing in Latin America is an important case for the study of the co-production of public security. Latin America and the Caribbean have the highest rates of crime and violence of any region (Muggah and Tobon, 2018; Vilalta, 2020). These high crime rates impose substantial welfare costs (Soares and Naritomi, 2010; Jaitman et al., 2015) and, in public opinion surveys, regularly register as important concerns of citizens (LAPOP, 2022). One common metric used to characterize important features of citizen-police relations is citizen trust in police (Corbacho, Philipp, and Ruiz-Vega, 2015; Denny et al., 2023). In contemporary Latin America, our data suggest that increased individual-level trust in police predicts (1) increased downstream information sharing about crime (Table A7); (2) increased downstream engagement with police in community fora (Table A8, see also Hanson, Kronick, and Slough, 2024); and (3) a lower contemporaneous propensity to feel the need to arm oneself to provide security (Figure A6). Consequently, higher individual trust in the police is associated with increased willingness of citizens to rely on, interact, and cooperate with the police in the world's most violent region.

Yet, the modal setting for existing research on trust in police is the United States. Data from

Google Scholar in Appendix A reveal that literature on trust and policing in the US outpaces every other country, with 211% of the cites of the second-ranked country (France). There are more cites from the US than from all 21 countries in Latin America combined, and the US remains over-represented in the literature even relative to its population.¹ Arguably, the best-known empirical regularity from this research in the US has been written about for decades: white and/or rich Americans trust the police at higher rates than do Black and/or poor Americans (Decker, 1981; Skogan, 2005; Macdonald and Stokes, 2006).² This disparity in trust is typically attributed to disparities in police service to poor and minority populations relative to their rich or white counterparts.

In this paper, we evaluate whether the positive socioeconomic class-trust in police gradient from the US travels to Latin America. Latin America is the world’s most unequal region (Hoffman and Centeno, 2003; Gasparini and Lustig, 2011) where social class has long been considered a highly salient social cleavage.³ Work on police abuse and repression suggests that police abuses disproportionately target poor and marginalized communities (Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco, and Melo, 2020; González, 2020; González and Mayka, 2022). Anti-poor bias is believed to be pervasive in many Latin American justice systems more generally (O’Donnell, 1999; Brinks, 2007, 2019). Following the conventional logic from the United States, if poor treatment and bad security outcomes reduce trust in police, we would expect trust in the police to be increasing in socioeconomic status.

Leveraging 146 cross-sectional surveys from 20 countries in the region (LAPOP, 2022) and three-panel surveys, we do not find support for this conjecture. Indeed, pooling the 236,892 in-

¹Beyond its outsize role in the literature, the US serves as a useful benchmark for the study of citizen-police relations in other regions with different experiences of crime. Policing interventions developed in the US are routinely deployed in Latin America. Community policing—an innovation popularized after its implementation in Chicago (Skogan and Hartnett, 1997)—is now deployed and studied in Latin America and the Global South more broadly (Blair et al., 2021). Our original data from an expert survey (detailed below) suggests that empirical patterns from the US closely resemble expert beliefs about trust in the police in Latin America.

²For example, in a 2021 Gallup survey, 56% of white respondents and 27% of Black respondents expressed “quite a lot” or “a great deal” of confidence in the police (Gallup, 2021).

³Other identity-based cleavages (e.g., ethnicity or race) in Latin America vary more substantially between countries.

dividual responses from the cross-sectional surveys, we estimate that the correlation between income and trust in police is -0.053, and the correlation between education, a proxy for social class with less missingness, is -0.084. The negative correlation suggests that low socioeconomic-status individuals trust the police slightly more than their high socioeconomic counterparts. Both correlations are statistically distinguishable from zero. Disaggregating across countries, we do not find a positive correlation that is statistically distinguishable from zero between either measure of socioeconomic status and trust in police in *any* of the 20 Latin American/Caribbean countries for which we have data. This represents a significant departure from decades of findings from the US, where income and the same trust question exhibit a *positive* correlation of 0.12 on the same survey.⁴

These results are surprising in light of conventional wisdom about the relationship between policing outcomes and trust in police. We conducted a forecasting exercise (DellaVigna, Pope, and Vivalt, 2019) with two groups: academic scholars of politics and public administration in Latin America, some of whom actively design policing interventions in the region, and activists working on criminal justice issues in Mexico. The modal expert and average forecast anticipated a positive correlation between socioeconomic status and trust in police. Inaccuracies in forecasts stem primarily from underestimates of trust by poor respondents (those at the 10th percentile). In contrast, respondents proved more accurate in assessing trust among median and rich respondents (those at the 50th and 90th percentiles, respectively). Importantly, US-based expectations persisted in our expert sample despite some recent work that documents a negative class-trust association in Latin America as a secondary finding (Malone and Dammert, 2021; Heffernan, 2024), and despite Latin America’s distinct police history, shaped by authoritarian legacies (Magaloni and Rodriguez, 2020; González, 2020; Osorio, Schubiger, and Weintraub, 2018).

Why do our results depart so substantially from existing understandings of the correlates of trust in police derived from decades of research in the US? To answer this question, we measure

⁴In the US, the racial disparity in trust in police between Black and White respondents is approximately twice the magnitude of the difference between respondents in the top and bottom income decile.

manifestations of multiple mechanisms that could produce correlations between class and trust in police. Leveraging the fact that the same survey instrument collects data from both Latin America and the US (LAPOP, 2022), we use the well-studied US case as a benchmark for comparison. In the US, trust increases with socioeconomic status—a robust pattern documented across decades. This comparative approach allows us to probe the external validity of mechanisms thought to generate canonical US findings (Slough and Tyson, 2023).

We argue that citizen trust in police evolves through observation of police or security outputs. Citizens who experience police abuse or crime victimization update negatively about police trustworthiness. Those who receive effective service update positively. Correlational evidence from cross-sectional surveys and average treatment effects on the treated (ATTs) from panel data confirm that crime victimization, police corruption, and neighborhood insecurity reduce trust in police across Latin American countries, as expected. The conventional wisdom from the US holds that rich citizens receive better service from the police and are thus more likely to observe trustworthy signals. As this process perpetuates, the rich come to trust the police at higher rates, inducing the observed positive correlation between class and trust in police. This mechanism—that the rich receive more positive signals—appeared frequently in our expert elicitation exercise.

Yet our analysis of self-reported survey data reveals a different pattern in Latin America: rich respondents report higher rates of crime victimization and police corruption than poor respondents, a pattern has been noted peripherally in other work (Bateson, 2012; Lupu et al., 2023). Further, perceptions of insecurity do not vary substantially by socioeconomic status. While these observations help explain the negative correlation between trust and socioeconomic status observed in Latin America, they stand in contrast to administrative data on violent crime (e.g., homicide) and expert beliefs that the poor are disproportionate victims of crime, insecurity, and abuse by police.

This apparent contradiction between conventional wisdom and survey data can be resolved through two observations. First, police corruption, perceived insecurity, and crime rates are higher in Latin America than in the US, creating a greater overall probability of observing poor signals of police performance. Second, we provide suggestive evidence that the translation of observed

outcomes into *perceived* signals varies by socioeconomic status. We argue that the probability of perceiving a negative signal of police performance is higher for rich than for poor citizens, holding fixed latent policing quality. This differential perception increases the exposure of the rich to signals of poor police performance, holding constant actual performance.⁵ This mechanism likely operates in the US as well but remains less influential given lower rates of crime and insecurity.

This paper contributes to the extensive literature on institutional trust (Levi and Stoker, 2000; Citrin and Stoker, 2018). We build on the insight that trust is cognitive (Bhattacharya, Devinney, and Pillutla, 1998; Hardin, 2003) by using data to isolate different attributes of citizens' updating on police agent trustworthiness. We show strong evidence that citizens of all socioeconomic statuses update in a roughly Bayesian manner (on average) in response to *perceived* signals of low trustworthiness. Yet, we note that these signals of police performance are ultimately perceptions, which vary in their fidelity to actual service provision. To the extent that this mapping between service provision and citizen perceptions varies in demographic features—like class—similar state outputs may beget very different levels of trust.

More broadly, our findings from the case of policing in Latin America suggest that relationships between citizens and bureaucratic service providers may well be more context-specific than recognized by the existing literature. The differences we document in the class-trust in the police gradient in the US versus Latin America suggest a broader need for the comparative study of citizen-service provider interactions across multiple cases to understand how these relationships vary from those observed in the US.

Our paper is primarily descriptive, responding to important calls for larger-scale quantitative description (Gerring, 2012; Munger, Guess, and Hargittai, 2021). Methodologically, we extend the use of expert forecasting from experiments (DellaVigna, Pope, and Vivaldi, 2019; DellaVigna, Otis, and Vivaldi, 2020: e.g.,) to reveal blindspots in expert beliefs. Substantively, our descriptive

⁵We show that conditional on perceiving such a signal, poor and rich citizens update in the same direction by a similar magnitude. Thus, one need not be highly educated to rationally update on police trustworthiness from these signals, unlike arguments in other domains (Weitz-Shapiro and Winters, 2017).

findings complement causal evidence from recent randomized interventions that have explicitly sought to increase citizen trust in police (Blair et al., 2021; Karim, 2020). Our descriptive findings characterize status-quo or baseline levels of trust in police in Latin America. Because causal effects of policing interventions are ultimately differences from these baseline levels, a richer descriptive understanding of this important outcome has two benefits. First, we can better interpret the causal and welfare effects of interventions. Second, for policymakers, police forces, and scholars intent on increasing trust in police, we show that these interventions are less easily targetable (on the basis of income) than in the US context.

1 Trust in Police: Concept and Context

1.1 Concept of institutional trust

Social scientists have devoted substantial attention to the measurement of citizens’ trust in government or governmental institutions (Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Levi and Stoker, 2000). Nevertheless, the definition of “trust”—and, indeed, the possibility of institutional trust—remains contested (PytlíkZillig and Kimbrough, 2016). Building upon the conceptualizations of Hardin (2003) and Gerbasi and Cook (2009), we conceive of institutional trust as being *cognitive* and *relational*.

By cognitive, we mean that trust is fundamentally a belief. Bhattacharya, Devinney, and Pillutla (1998: p. 465) characterize trust as “an expectancy of positive (or nonnegative) outcomes one can receive based on the expected action of another party in an interaction characterized by uncertainty.” In other words, individuals hold a belief about how the other party is likely to act or behave. In the context of policing, this could be an individual’s expectation about how police will treat them or an expectation of whether and how police will respond to a tip about a crime or misdemeanor.

By relational, we emphasize interactions between two parties, citizens and police agents. This is implicit in the formulation of trust by Bhattacharya, Devinney, and Pillutla (1998). Within this conception of trust, beliefs can be changed (updated) by observation of the other party’s behavior. In the context of citizen trust in police, thus, when citizens observe police behavior, they gain

information about police trustworthiness. This signal can be used to update a citizen's belief about how the police might behave toward them in subsequent encounters. An unsavory encounter with a police agent, for example, can lead citizens to negatively update about the trustworthiness of police, in general, thereby reducing trust in police.

Hardin (2003) was skeptical of whether institutional trust is possible, largely because of limits to citizens' ability to form relationships with an institution. Whereas citizens may be able to interact with individual police agents, Hardin (2003) argues, it is nonstandard to think of an institution as an actor with whom these interactions might take place. We argue that interactions/relationships between individual citizens and individual police agents shape trust in police. In this context, citizens can hold beliefs about whether an individual officer is trustworthy. Moreover, they can make assessments about the share of trustworthy officers on a police force (or in a given police unit). Institutional trust is, therefore, both cognitive and relational.

It is useful to clarify two alternatives distinct from our concept of institutional trust. First, some authors view or evaluate political trust as a trait (e.g., Ojeda, 2016; Mondak et al., 2011). Individuals from different groups may have different baseline propensities to trust other individuals or agents of institutions. If this were the case, environmental or genetic traits could confound the relationship between social class and trust. Alternatively, social/political trust may facilitate economic advancement, thereby increasing an individual's social class and generating a positive association between the two measures (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti, 1993). Second, individuals undoubtedly hold varying preferences over what police should do or how the institution should function. The accounts of motivated reasoning or inference proposed by Kunda (1987) and Taber and Lodge (2006) suggest that these preferences may affect how citizens form beliefs about police trustworthiness. While it is, of course, possible that preferences condition updating processes (Little, Schnakenberg, and Turner, 2022), we contend that experiences with the police—good or bad—shape future expectations about police agents in the direction of the signal.

1.2 Policing and class in Latin America

Despite Latin America's regional turn towards democracy, police forces routinely engage in corrupt and abusive behavior (Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco, and Melo, 2020; Johnson, Mendelson Forman, and Bliss, 2012). Researchers have traced this persistence of authoritarian policing practices to pre-democratic state structures that often persist not in spite of democracy but because of democratic processes (González, 2020). The militarization of law enforcement, prevalent throughout the region, has been shown to have the potential to further undermine police legitimacy (Sung, Capellan, and and, 2022; Flores-Macías and Zarkin, 2021).

Yet experiences with police vary significantly by class. Research indicates that police forces behave repressively toward lower-income individuals and marginalized groups while responding to demands of privileged community members (González and Mayka, 2022; González, 2020; Caldeira, 2000). Regional scholars have documented persistent bias against poor, indigenous, and other marginalized communities in justice systems across Latin America (O'Donnell, 1999; Brinks, 2007, 2019). Overall, existing accounts support a common premise: socioeconomic status predicts exposure to policing and its outcomes. These distinct experiences should provide different opportunities for learning about police trustworthiness.

Recent work hints at a surprising negative class-trust in police gradient. Heffernan (2024), Malone and Dammert (2021), and Cao and Zhao (2005) estimate negative coefficients on education in multivariate regressions predicting trust in police, while focusing on distinct substantive questions. Malone and Dammert (2021) investigate community-oriented policing practices across 17 countries and report negative education and income correlations as ancillary findings. Heffernan (2024), predict trust in police using multivariate regression, and note a negative coefficient estimate on education, among other demographic patterns. To our knowledge, however, no study has systematically analyzed how support for police covaries with class across Latin American countries nor recognized the negative correlation between socioeconomic status and trust as a distinctive pattern of police-citizen relations in the region.

2 Research design

Our primary research question is descriptive: How does trust in police vary in social class? Accordingly, we estimate the correlation between measures of socioeconomic status and reported trust in police. We view these correlations as important in characterizing citizen-police relationships in Latin America and elsewhere.

This quantity—correlation between socioeconomic status and trust—is likely to capture information relevant to interactions between citizens and police. Levels of trust are not an outwardly observed characteristic, but individuals’ level of trust in the police predicts at least some citizen behaviors toward the police. For example, Hanson, Kronick, and Slough (2024) show that citizen behavior toward police—in the context of community-police meetings—does vary in levels of trust in Medellín, Colombia. In the context of interactions with citizens, it is plausible that police officers may want to ascertain a citizen’s level of trust when deciding how to engage. Because beliefs are unobserved, police may use observable characteristics to infer a citizen’s trust and their likely behavior, a form of statistical discrimination (Phelps, 1972). In contrast to levels of trust, in Latin America, socioeconomic status is typically easily observable through an individual’s dress, way of speaking, comportment, and surroundings (Britto Ruiz and Ordóñez Valverde, 2005; Villarreal, 2010).

2.1 Data

Our principal data source is LAPOP’s AmericasBarometer (LAPOP, 2022). The sample incorporates the responses of 236,892 individuals collected from 146 unique surveys in 20 Latin American countries between 2004 and 2019. Each survey round was designed to be representative of the country’s voting-age population that year. Table A1 lists the years and countries where the surveys were collected.

We use respondents’ self-reported income brackets to measure socioeconomic status or class. We supplement this measure with individuals’ educational attainment in years of schooling to assuage concerns that systematic misreporting of income might drive any results. In each round,

respondents are asked about their trust in several institutions. We measure trust in the police with the question “To what extent do you trust the Police?” Responses range from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a lot).⁶

We complement the (repeated) cross-sectional data from LAPOP with three panel surveys that measure trust in police: a five-wave nationally representative survey from Chile (COES, 2022), a two-wave representative survey from Medellín, Colombia conducted in 2018 and 2019 (Hanson, Kronick, and Slough, 2024), and a quarterly representative rolling panel from Mexican cities spanning 2017-2023 (INEGI, 2024). While these surveys cover just three settings (Chile, Medellín, and Mexico, respectively), they allow us to examine within-individual variation over time.⁷ We focus on individual variation in exposure to poor police service provision—crime victimization, police corruption, and perceived insecurity.

2.2 Estimation

We use ordinary least squares (OLS) to estimate the correlation between trust in police and socioeconomic status, as detailed in Equation 1. We regress individual i ’s self-reported trust in the police, Trust_i , on a self-reported measure of class (income or education), Class_i . For the purpose of comparing across countries and survey waves, we standardize both variables within country-year to account for differences in baseline levels across contexts and periods and facilitate comparison.⁸ To denote standardized versions of these variables, we use the superscript Z . To estimate the correlation between trust in police and socioeconomic status, we estimate (1) using OLS and cluster standard errors at the level of each survey’s primary sampling unit. Because the dependent and the independent variables are standardized, β is the estimator of the correlation coefficient.

$$\text{Trust}_i^Z = \alpha + \beta \text{Class}_i^Z + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

⁶We report all survey questions and response scales in Table A5.

⁷While other existing longitudinal surveys cover other Latin American countries, we are unaware of others that include repeated questions about policing.

⁸See Section A2.3 in the Appendix for details.

Correlation summarizes a linear relationship. We allow for non-linearities in the relationship between trust and socioeconomic status by binning measures of socioeconomic status by decile and further estimating the following equation by OLS:

$$\text{Trust}_i = \sum_{d=1}^{10} \beta_d \mathbb{I}[\text{Class}_i = d] + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

In this expression, the β_d 's are estimators of the average level of reported trust in police by respondents in each decile d .

Finally, when considering explanations for observed patterns of trust in police, we examine how individual experiences of police abuse or poor security outputs affect trust in police (both unconditionally and by a respondent's socioeconomic class). To do so, we rely on the panel surveys at the individual level to estimate the average treatment effect on the treated (ATT). We report estimates from standard two-way fixed effects estimators to estimate the ATT. We denote a binary observation of poor performance $S_{it} \in \{0, 1\}$ and estimate:

$$\text{Trust}_{it} = \delta S_{it} + \gamma_t + \psi_i + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (3)$$

where γ_t and ψ_i are time and unit fixed effects, respectively. In this specification, δ is our estimator of the ATT. We also employ a more general fixed effects counterfactual estimator proposed by Liu, Wang, and Xu (2022) to ensure the robustness of our ATT estimates to a variety of weighting problems that arise with two-way fixed effects estimators.

3 Baseline results

We present estimates of the correlation between socioeconomic status and trust in the police for the entire pooled sample of Latin American respondents in Figure 1. In addition, we also plot country-specific correlations and include the US-specific correlation as a benchmark. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the overall pooled correlation and all but one country-specific result are close to zero and slightly negative. The estimated correlation for the pooled Latin American sample

is -0.053 [95% CI: -0.059, -0.046] when class is operationalized as income and -0.084 [95% CI: -0.089, -0.078] when we use education as a proxy. El Salvador has the most negative country-specific correlation, with an estimated correlation of -0.18 [95% CI: -0.20, -0.16] when class is operationalized as education. For the rest of the countries, the correlation oscillates between -0.15 and .01. In the cases of Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Jamaica, and Peru, at least one correlation estimate is not statistically distinguishable from zero. Conversely, the estimated correlation for the US is 0.12 [95% CI: 0.09, 0.15] when class is operationalized as income and 0.025 [95% CI: 0.002, 0.05] when we use education as a proxy.

Correlation measures a linear relationship. Do the weak, negative correlations reported in Figure 1 mask a stronger, non-monotonic relationship between socioeconomic status and self-reported trust in the police? To explore the possibility, we divide respondents into class deciles and plot the mean level of trust in the police for the members of each decile. As before, we compute the means for the entire pooled sample and each country. Figure 2 reveals no evidence of a non-monotonic relationship between the two variables: the mean levels of trust are stable or decreasing only slightly in income or education in all countries and the pooled sample.

One limitation of our analysis is that we measure class using self-reported education and income measures, which are indirect measures of socioeconomic status. Three alternative measures may be preferable for different purposes. First, some countries have administrative classifications of class. For example, in Colombia, dwellings are categorized by *estrato* (socioeconomic stratum) to prorate public utility charges. Similarly, based on census data, the Mexican National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) classifies primary sampling units of dwellings into sociodemographic *estratos*. Drawing upon the original panel survey in Medellín, we estimate a correlation between dwelling *estrato* and trust in the police of 0.068 [95% CI: 0.029, 0.107]. We note, however, that the sample is not representative of Colombia and is not weighted to the population of Medellín. Nevertheless, this figure is substantially lower than the correlation between income and trust in police that we estimate from US data. The correlation estimated using the Mexican panel data is similar to the LAPOP estimates based on self-reported education and income: -0.073 [95%

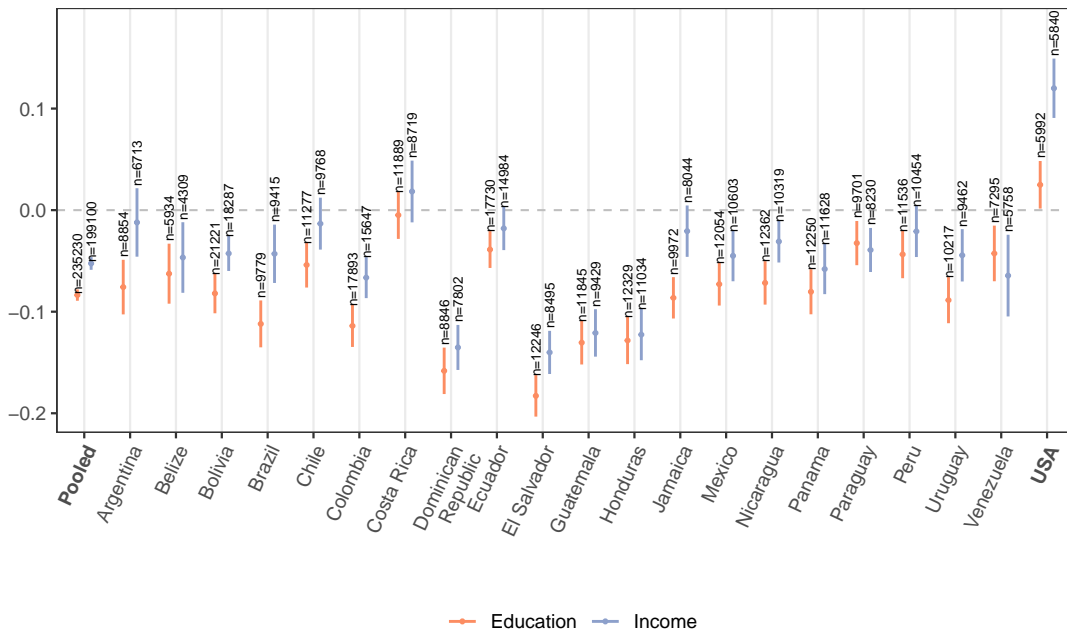


Figure 1: Correlation between LAPOP respondents' self-reported trust in police and two class measures: income (in blue) and education (in orange).

CI: -0.093, -.052] and -0.045, [95% CI: -0.070, -.020], respectively.

Second, citizens may identify with a higher or lower class than their income or education would suggest. From panel data in Chile, in which class identification is measured subjectively, we estimate a correlation of 0.038 (95% CI: [0.003, 0.073]) between self-identified class and trust in police. Again, this correlation remains substantially weaker than correlations between class and trust in police observed in the US.

Third, some researchers argue that expenditure-based economic status indicators might be more accurate than measures based on self-reported income. We follow Córdova (2009) and construct a wealth index using a battery of LAPOP questions measuring possession of household assets. Appendix A2.4 details the construction of this index and reports consistent pooled and country-specific results in Figure A2. However, the index is difficult to substantively interpret in a repeated cross-section, where factor loadings vary substantially (and non-monotonically) across time and between countries (see Figure A3). For this reason, we prefer analyses based on self-reported income and education. Overall, these ancillary surveys suggest that our findings from the widely

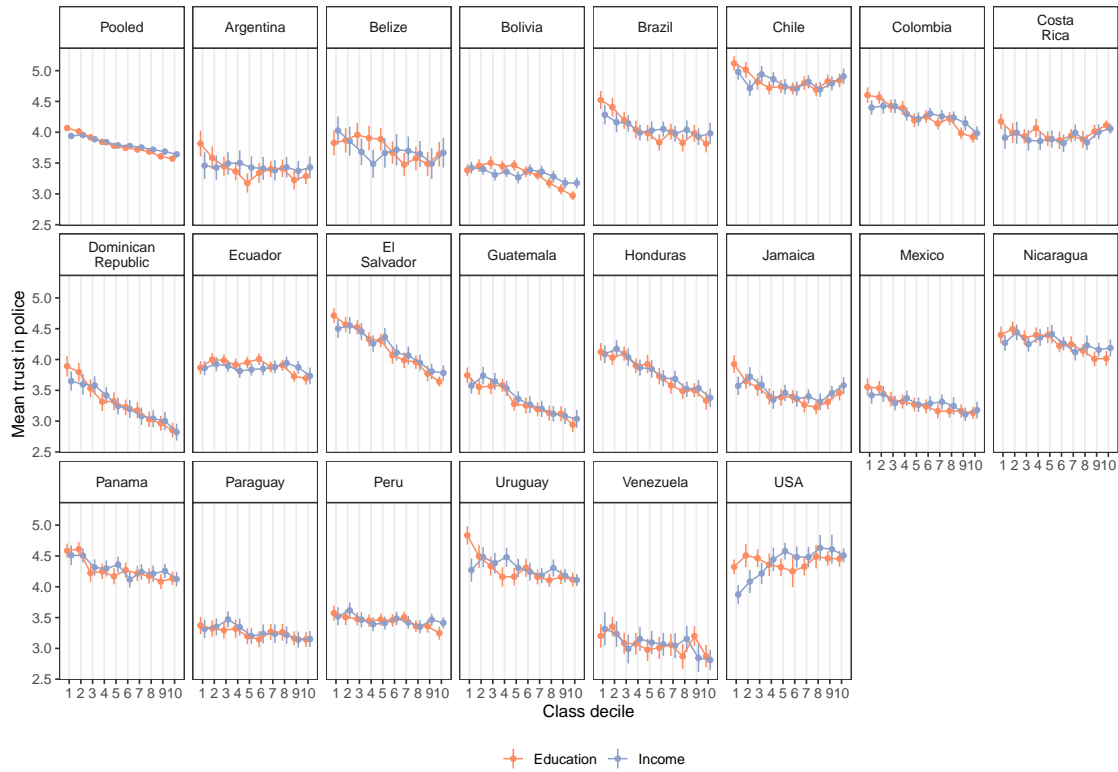


Figure 2: Mean trust in the police on a seven-point scale (1-7) by decile of income (in blue) and education (in orange).

available LAPOP proxies of class do not substantially mislead relative to plausible alternative measures.

One potential concern is that respondents from different socioeconomic classes may interpret or respond to trust-related questions differently, introducing systematic measurement error that could bias our results. Since we have only one measure of trust in police from the LAPOP surveys, we cannot directly test for measurement invariance. Instead, we assess whether our findings reflect a general response pattern by examining correlations between socioeconomic status and trust in other institutions. If poorer respondents were systematically more trusting due to acquiescence bias, social desirability, or differential scale use, we would generally observe negative correlations between class and trust across institutional measures. Figure A8 shows this is not the case: correlations between class and institutional trust vary in both sign and magnitude. Most importantly, trust in police is the only measure where the class-trust correlation is both statistically significant in

the U.S. and Latin America *and* takes opposite signs across regions. This reversal for police—but not for other institutions—suggests our findings reflect differences in police-citizen relationships across class lines in Latin America rather than measurement artifacts or response biases.

4 Expert Forecasts

The finding that trust in the police covaries weakly and, in general, negatively with socioeconomic status in Latin America was surprising to us. We conducted an expert forecast elicitation with two samples to assess whether our findings were similarly surprising to other experts. Expert forecasts are increasingly used to measure experts' prior beliefs about quantities of interest in social science research (DellaVigna, Pope, and Vivaldi, 2019).

Our two expert samples are (i) scholars of Latin American politics and (ii) activists working on issues of human rights and policing. We used a recent program of a Latin American politics conference known for the participation of scholars from all regions as our sample frame for the academic sample. While the scholars maintain varied research portfolios, a subset of these researchers study crime and policing in the region, including some who actively conduct evaluations of policing interventions (typically with local police partners). To assemble the sampling frame of activists, one of the authors identified a network of activists through past non-academic employment related to policing in Mexico. All participants were invited to share the survey with other interested colleagues and students. In sum, we collected 121 country-level forecasts from 101 unique experts. Table A9 in the Appendix shows the count of forecasts by country and respondent type.

We asked experts to provide at least one *forecast* for one country in Latin America (or the region as a whole). A forecast consists of three quantities: mean levels of trust—per the LAPOP survey question—at the 10th, 50th, and 90th percentiles of household income. As depicted in Figure A10, our forecasting instrument contextualized the income range by reporting the average income at each level. Respondents had access to the text of relevant LAPOP questions in English and Spanish.

Figure 3 shows that, on average, expert respondents expected a positive correlation between

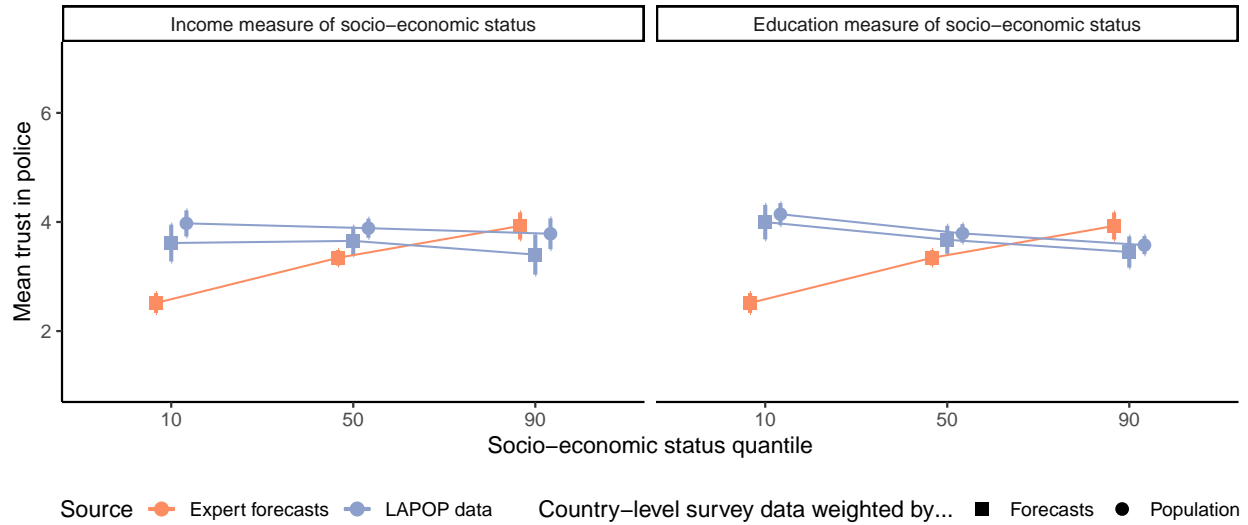


Figure 3: Divergence between average forecasts (in orange) and corresponding survey-based measures (in blue).

socioeconomic status and trust in police. The average expert forecast is monotonically increasing from 2.51 [95% CI: 2.32, 2.69] for citizens in the first decile of income to 3.34 [95% CI: 3.20, 3.49] for citizens of median income to 3.93 [95% CI: 3.68, 4.18] for citizens in the tenth decile of income. Because the forecast is an average over country-level forecasts, we report two measures from the survey data, drawn in blue. First, we weight country-level surveys by the prevalence of each country in the forecasts to ensure that the frequency with which countries are forecasted does not drive the divergence. We also weigh the survey data by each country's population, offering a more interpretable regional average. Both weighting schemes yield similar flat or slightly negative relationships between socioeconomic status and trust in police, starkly contrasting with the forecasts. The right panel of the graph shows that using education rather than self-reported income to measure class in the LAPOP survey data does not change our qualitative finding that the positive relationship between income and crime anticipated by experts—including us—is not borne out in the data.

Two further disaggregations of the forecast data help to clarify experts' expectations. First, Figure 4 disaggregates four types of forecasts. As in Figure 3, the modal prediction suggested a *positive* relationship between socioeconomic status and trust in police. Additionally, 30% of

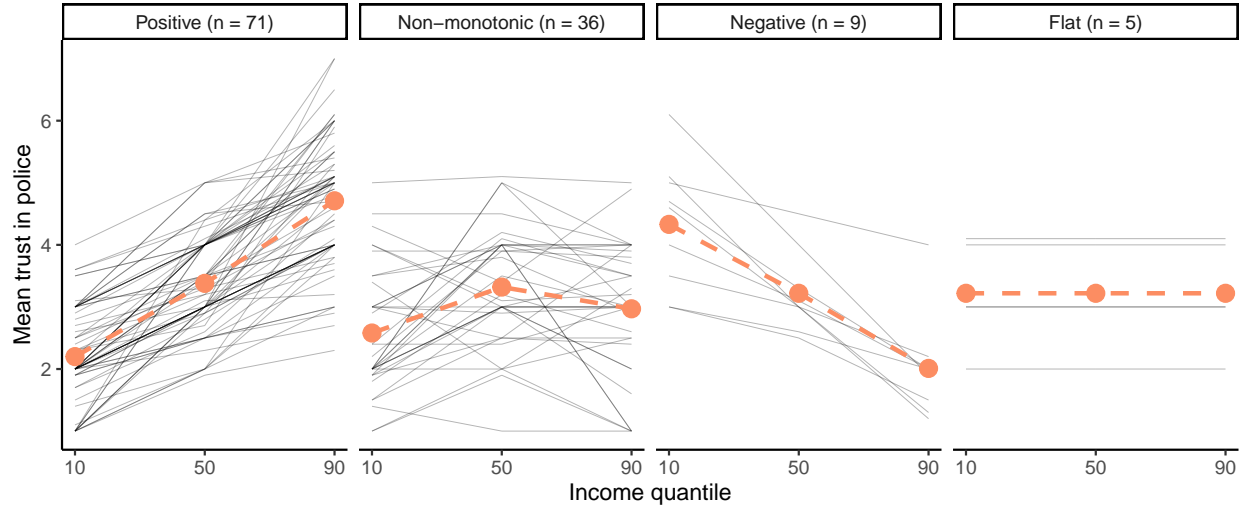


Figure 4: Classification of individual forecasts. Thin lines each represent individual forecasts. The points and dashed lines represent averages for each type of forecast.

forecasts posited a non-monotonic relationship. On balance, these forecasts suggested that a citizen with a median household income should trust the police more than the rich or the poor. Just 7.5% and 4% of forecasts posited a negative or flat relationship, respectively. Second, Figure A11 in the Appendix shows that the prediction of a positive relationship between income and trust in police is not specific to any country: we observe a similar pattern in all countries for which we have ≥ 8 predictions: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico. Thus, these US-anchored expectations prevail in regional experts.

These forecasts help us to identify several blindspots in our collective understanding of trust in police in Latin America. First, Figure 3 reveals that, in the aggregate, experts were more accurate in their assessment of average trust in police among the middle class (50th percentile) and rich. The underestimation of trust in police among poor Latin Americans largely drives errors in expert beliefs. This pattern suggests a need for a better understanding of interactions between poor citizens and police in the region. Second, to the extent that interventions like community policing aim to build trust in police as a primary objective (e.g., Blair et al., 2021), expert beliefs would suggest that interventions should be targeted to poor communities to maximize the possibility to increase trust in police. Instead, survey data shows that these interventions are difficult to target on the basis

of socioeconomic status and that if such interventions are effective, there is (slightly) more room to increase trust in police among the rich, not the poor.

5 Trust and experiences with police

To this point, we have established that trust in police is generally weakly and negatively correlated with socioeconomic status in Latin America. Within our cognitive conceptualization of trust, citizen trust in police should evolve through observation of police behavior or security outputs. As such, our results suggest that the rich observe worse policing outcomes in Latin America than the poor. Such a pattern runs contrary to regional experts' expectations and conventional wisdom based on evidence from the US. We now seek to explain this discrepancy between expectations and empirical findings. To that end, we examine additional data on respondent experiences with police and perceptions of security outcomes.

5.1 Security-socioeconomic-status gradient

Our concept of trust in police centers on citizens updating their beliefs about police trustworthiness based on their experience with or observation of policing outcomes. Within this framework, a negative correlation between socioeconomic status and trust in police implies wealthier respondents perceive worse policing outcomes than their poorer co-citizens. To test, we identify one experience—police solicitation of bribes (corruption)—and two policing outcomes—crime victimization and perceptions of safety—in the survey data. We examine the rate at which respondents of different socioeconomic classes report observing these signals of poor police performance. While the experiences of crime victimization and feeling “unsafe” do not necessarily require active interaction with police, they at least imply that police failed to prevent crime or inspire a feeling of security.

We measure self-reported crime victimization and experiences with police using survey data. The use of survey data is often preferred to official crime statistics given selective reporting to the police (Skogan, 1976; Cantor and Lynch, 2000), and for comparative research where legal definitions of crimes vary (Van Dijk, 2015). Yet, there are some potential concerns with using such

self-reports. First, with respect to the accuracy of self-reported crime victimization, in Figure A14, we show that self-reported victimization correlates positively with the homicide rate using administrative microdata from Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. This correspondence is reassuring because homicide is less likely to go unreported than other crimes (World Health Organization, 2014: p. 20). Second, our crime victimization measures—especially from the cross-sectional surveys—do not permit analysis of the rate or consequences of serial victimization (Bateson, 2012). Thus, following a recommendation from Bateson (2012), we use the panel surveys to examine serial victimization, revealing that the effect of victimization on trust compounds but that the marginal effect of each subsequent victimization experience decreases (Figure A15). Finally, one might be concerned about how victimization affects citizens’ willingness to participate in a survey or modules about crime therein. To this end, we show extremely low missingness of crime-related questions in LAPOP (0.2% in the full sample) and that selection into subsequent waves of a panel survey does not substantially vary as a function of crime victimization at time t (Table A10).

In Figure 5, we plot the country-specific probability that a respondent from each socioeconomic decile reports each of the three binary signals of police trustworthiness, following (2). We use analogous LAPOP survey data from the US as a benchmark. The top three panels bin respondents into deciles using education, while the bottom three panels bin respondents using income.

The first column panels in Figure 5 show that, for most Latin American countries,⁹ the probability of self-reported crime victimization increases in socioeconomic status. Conversely, in the case of the US, the probability of reporting crime victimization does not change with class when it is measured with education, and it slightly *decreases* when it is measured with income.¹⁰ Overall, the figure shows that the probability of observing a negative signal of policing quality, be it police corruption, perceived insecurity, or crime victimization, is higher in Latin America than in the US, on average.

⁹The correlation between victimization and class is always positive and statistically distinguishable from zero at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level, except for correlation with income in Panama and Venezuela.

¹⁰The correlation between crime victimization and class in the US is negative and statistically distinguishable from zero at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level when class is measured with income, and positive but statistically indistinguishable from zero when measured with education.

Whether the presence of a positive relationship between class and victimization in Latin America is a surprising finding is unclear. On the one hand, the presence of a positive relationship between class and victimization in Latin America aligns with scattered findings in prior research. Bateson (2012) found that crime victims tend to be better educated than non-victims, Lupu et al. (2023) reports that wealthier, more educated citizens are more likely to be asked for bribes, and Gaviria and Pagés (2002) documented higher property crime rates in wealthier urban areas. On the other hand, poorer neighborhoods and municipalities consistently experience higher rates of violent crime and insecurity. The panel survey from Medellín and administrative crime data for Medellín and Mexico City help reconcile this apparent contradiction by disaggregating crime victimization by type. Figure A16 shows that self-reported exposure to violent crimes (especially homicide) is more common among the poor, whereas property crimes—which occur with higher frequency—disproportionately target the rich. Figures A18 and A17 confirm this pattern using administrative data on within-city variation in crime and income.

Despite the positive relationship between socioeconomic class and self-reported victimization identified in the data, the middle panels of Figure 5 suggest that the probability of feeling unsafe in a respondent’s neighborhood generally does not vary in socioeconomic status for Latin American respondents. Conversely, for US respondents, the probability of feeling unsafe is uniformly lower than in any of the Latin American countries and decreases as socioeconomic class increases.

The right panels of Figure 5 report the probability that respondents recall a police officer asking for a bribe in the last year. The positive relationship suggests that the rich in Latin America are asked for bribes more frequently across countries and class measures. From the perspective of rent maximization, these are the citizens from whom police may be able to extract larger sums. Conversely, the probability of reporting bribe solicitation is near zero for US respondents in each decile. This measure, of course, does not rule out police corruption in the US, but it does suggest that individual experiences of bribe solicitation are highly circumscribed in the US.

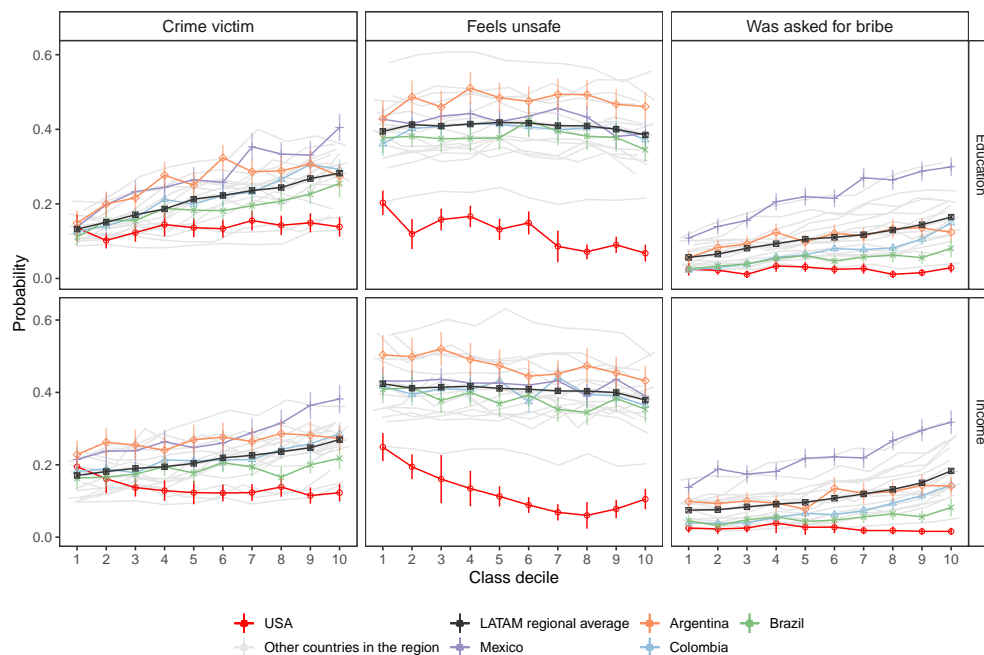


Figure 5: Lines show the estimated country-specific probability that a respondent from each education decile (top row) and income decile (bottom row) reports (from left to right): having been a victim of a crime during the past 12 months, perceiving the neighborhood as unsafe, and a police officer soliciting a bribe.

5.2 Updating on policing outcomes

Latin American respondents report worse policing outcomes, on average, than US respondents. Additionally, survey evidence indicates wealthy Latin American respondents report being asked for bribes and being victims of crime at higher rates than the poor. We now show that exposure to signals of the police’s untrustworthiness —police solicitation of bribes, crime victimization, and perceptions of safety— is, in fact, associated with the level of trust reported.

Figure 6 plots the predicted level of trust in the police as a function of our three signals (denoted S_i) of police trustworthiness: (i) crime victimization in the past 12 months (left), (ii) feeling “unsafe” in their neighborhood (center), and (iii) whether a police officer asked for a bribe during the past 12 months (right). In each panel, the black line plots the mean level of trust by decile of socioeconomic status across the full sample. This line is very similar across all three vertical panels: the only (slight) differences come from variation in the presence of questions measuring

the aforementioned signals across country-year survey waves. For each measure of socioeconomic status (the horizontal panels), trust decreases slightly and monotonically as income increases. We note that these means can be additively decomposed as follows:

$$E[\text{Trust}_i] = E[S_i = 1]E[\text{Trust}_i|S_i = 1] + E[S_i = 0]E[\text{Trust}_i|S_i = 0] \quad (4)$$

The orange and blue points and lines report our estimates of the conditional expectations in (4). The blue line ($E[\text{Trust}|S_i = 1]$) consistently falls below the orange line ($E[\text{Trust}|S_i = 0]$). This is consistent with our expectations—and the conventional wisdom—that poor security outcomes or treatment by police reduce trust in police. Importantly we see evidence consistent with updating—the difference in the orange and blue lines—for all deciles of socioeconomic status. The idea that poor treatment or outcomes reduce trust is consistent with many existing theoretical and empirical accounts of trust in government or government institutions (Hardin, 2003; Levi and Stoker, 2000). We do not find evidence that poor, middle-class, and rich Latin Americans update according to fundamentally different cognitive processes. This analysis does not, for example, support claims that citizen rationality (in this domain) varies in education or socioeconomic status.

The distance between the black lines and the orange/blue lines reflects the share of respondents that experience a given signal (e.g., $E[S_i = 1]$ from (4)). We see that crime victimization and especially bribe solicitation are *rare* at all levels of socioeconomic status (consistent with Figure 5). This is evident because the black line is much closer to the orange line, the conditional means for citizens who did not observe the signal in the last year. Indeed, in the full sample, only 21.0% and 10.6% of respondents reported crime victimization or bribe solicitation in the last year, respectively. The correlations in Figure 5 suggest that these outcomes of policing are increasing in socioeconomic status, which is evident from the growing distance between the black and orange lines as socioeconomic status increases. For example, moving from the lowest to the highest decile of education corresponds to (reported) increases from 13.5% to 28.1% in crime victimization and from 5.7% to 16.3% in bribe solicitation. While these differences in exposure to poor police behavior do increase the (negative) gradient of socioeconomic status and trust in police by pulling

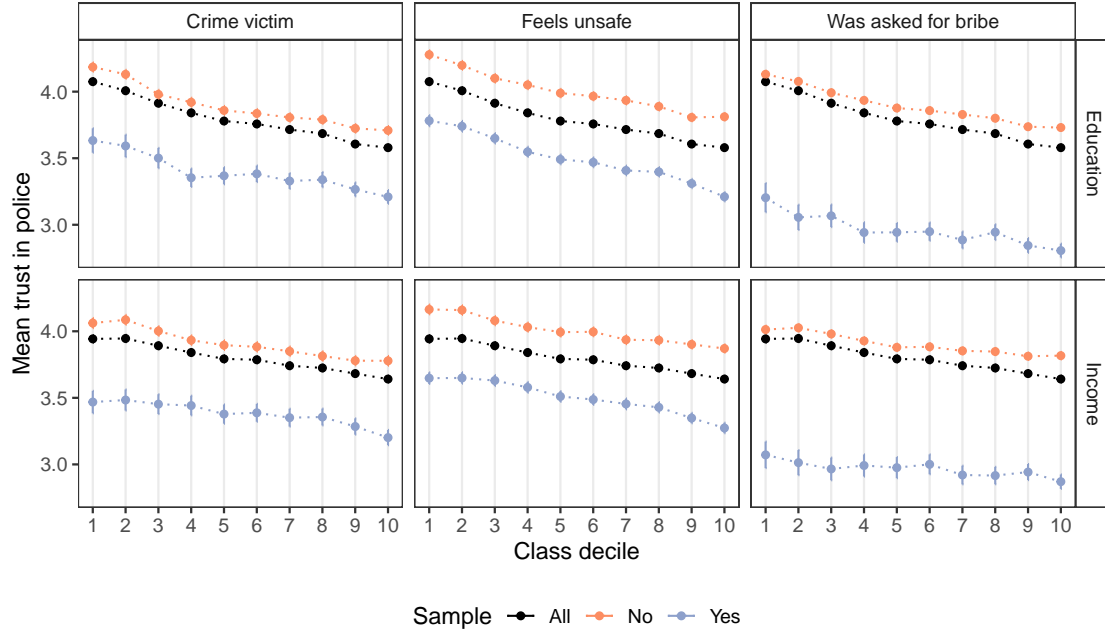


Figure 6: Predicted level of trust in police, by class decile, as a function of the following binary signals: crime victimization in the past 12 months (first panel), feeling unsafe in their neighborhood (second panel), and a police officer asked for a bribe during the past 12 months (third panel). The model was fit on pooled data from all country-waves.

the black line toward the blue line, we note that these differences in isolation do not account for the negative gradient of the orange and blue lines.

5.3 Updating on policing outcomes: panel evidence

Our language in this section has veered closer to causal language. Ideally, we would describe the updating in Figure 6 as the *effect* of different signals of police trustworthiness on trust in police at different income levels. To isolate the effect of such signals on trust in police, exposure to policing outcomes should be (conditionally) orthogonal to individuals' trust in police. While we lack a research design capable of supporting such an inference with the LAPOP data, the panel surveys from Mexico, Medellín, and Chile permit estimation of average treatment effects on the treated (ATTs) for several closely related signals. We employ both two-way fixed effects (TWFE) and the fixed effects counterfactual estimator proposed by Liu, Wang, and Xu (2022) to target the corresponding estimands.

Both TWFE and the fixed effects counterfactual estimator identify the ATT under the parallel trends assumption: absent victimization, treated and control units would have experienced similar trust trajectories. Identification also requires no anticipatory changes in trust and no spillovers between respondents, which is highly plausible given the short panel windows and the personal nature of victimization. A potential threat to identification arises from endogenous treatment assignment. For example, if individuals with higher baseline trust engage more with the police, as shown by Hanson, Kronick, and Slough (2024), they may also face a greater risk of bribe solicitation. However, such selection would bias the estimates toward zero: since more trusting individuals are more likely to interact with police, and if such interactions with police reduce trust, our estimates would likely understate the true effect of victimization. Moreover, to the extent this selection is stable and linked to fixed traits like wealth, occupation, or neighborhood, individual fixed effects absorb it.

In Figure 7, we compare the estimated ATTs to cross-sectional associations. All estimated ATTs are significant at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level and signed consistently: feeling unsafe, crime victimization, and perceiving police corruption reduce trust in police. However, the ATT magnitudes are 49-81% smaller than cross-sectional associations, suggesting that while Figure 6 may overstate effect sizes, the core finding holds. Figure A19 shows that these effects do not vary by socioeconomic status.¹¹

We probe the assumption of no time-varying individual-level confounders with several placebo outcome tests (Eggers, Tuñón, and Dafoe, 2024). If victimization specifically signals police ineffectiveness rather than triggering general institutional distrust, it should not affect trust in non-police institutions. To test this, we use panel data from Medellín and estimate the association using both the TWFE and the fixed effects counterfactual estimator proposed by Liu, Wang, and Xu (2022) between trust in other institutions and victimization. Results, reported in Figure A7 in the Appendix, show that the only statistically significant decrease in trust after victimization is in trust in police (as reported in Figure 7). Moreover, the observed decrease in trust in police is larger in magnitude than in any other trust measure. While these placebo tests provide some reas-

¹¹We use the Mexican panel data for this test due to its larger sample size.

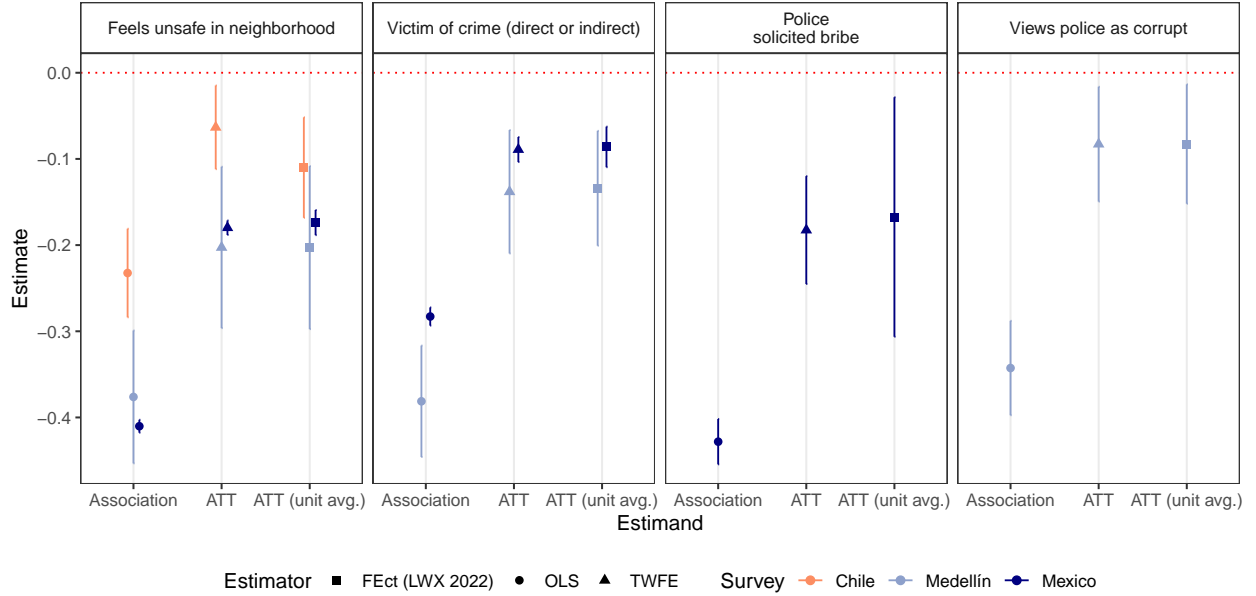


Figure 7: Estimates of pooled associations (across waves) compared to average treatment effects (ATT) on the treated. LWX (2022) indicates the fixed effects counterfactual estimator proposed by Liu, Wang, and Xu (2022). 95% confidence intervals use standard errors clustered at the primary sampling unit.

surance that our main findings are not driven by general shifts in institutional trust or time-varying confounders, we caution that they cannot fully rule out all forms of bias.

These results help clarify the negative correlation between trust and socioeconomic status observed in Latin America, in contrast to the US. Overall, wealthier respondents report experiencing worse policing quality than the region’s poor. While the most egregious police abuses and security failures disproportionately affect poor Latin Americans (González, 2020; Magaloni and Rodriguez, 2020), these events are less frequent than more quotidian signals of policing failures.

5.4 Translating security outcomes into signals

Our findings suggest that the surprising weak-to-negative correlation between socioeconomic status and trust in police stems, in part, from wealthier respondents’ higher rate of reporting signals of bad policing: crime, insecurity, and police corruption. Conventional wisdom—as expressed by forecasters—did not anticipate that the rich would express higher levels of insecurity/victimization than the poor. We argue that these expectations can be reconciled with our findings by considering

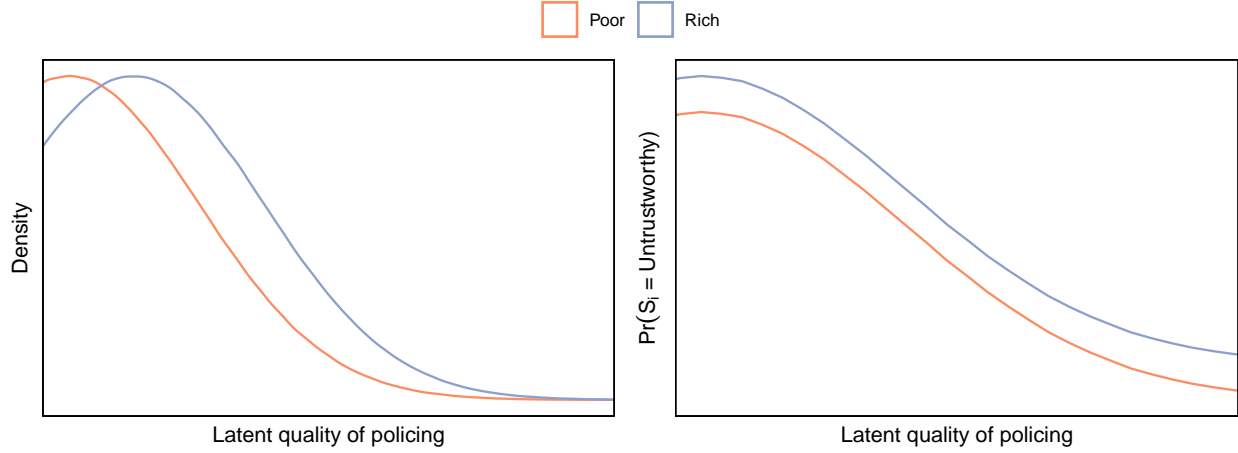


Figure 8: Illustration of how different latent levels of policing might translate into observed signals.

how policing outputs are translated into informational signals about police trustworthiness.

We contend that the underlying quality of policing is distinct from the signals that citizens observe, use, and ultimately report on public opinion surveys. Figure 8 considers how a latent (unobserved) quality of policing may translate into signals. In the left panel, we consider that the quality of policing may vary for citizens of different socioeconomic classes. The densities are hypothetical but reflect conventional wisdom that the quality of policing is better for rich citizens than poor citizens. In this case, we would expect that differences in police quality that favor the rich *increase* the correlation between socioeconomic status and trust in police.

Yet, this conventional wisdom is only one part of the story. We argue that citizens of different socioeconomic statuses may translate the quality of policing into signals of police trustworthiness differently. Specifically, we argue that the rich likely apply a more stringent standard to policing. This means that for a given level of latent police quality, the rich are more likely to interpret a negative (or untrustworthy) signal. We provide a visualization of this argument in the right panel of Figure 8. The functional forms are purely illustrative. The core piece of our argument is that for a latent police quality q , $\Pr(S_i = \text{Untrustworthy} \mid q)$ is weakly higher for rich than poor citizens. This conceptualization could accommodate a stochastic mapping of police quality onto the binary signal (as in Figure 8) or a deterministic threshold (in q) in which the threshold for observing an untrustworthy signal is greater for the poor than for the rich. In either case, the translation

of police quality into signals of police trustworthiness should *decrease* the correlation between socioeconomic status and trust in police, potentially even making this correlation negative.

Given that both the difference in the distribution of policing quality and the difference in the probability of observing a poor signal of police performance, exemplified in Figure 8, are likely present in our survey data, decomposing the relative contributions of each on the overall class-trust gradient is impossible if we cannot directly observe policing quality. A body of existing research establishes the prevalence of crime underreporting in administrative data, implying that policing quality is not directly observable (e.g., Carr and Doleac, 2016; Jaitman and Anauati, 2020). Therefore, we proceed by offering indirect evidence in support of the right panel of Figure 8.

First, recall the disaggregation of offenses from Medellín in Figure A16 that suggests that rich respondents report higher levels of property crimes (e.g., theft), whereas poor respondents report higher levels of violent crimes (e.g., homicide). Additionally, administrative data on homicide rates—the crime that is least likely to go unreported—from Medellín and Mexico City suggest that violent crime is decreasing in neighborhood income (see Figures A17 and A18). Yet, our binary measure of *any* crime victimization in the last year suggests similar levels of updating despite differences in the profile and severity of crimes that target these populations. Further, respondents across socioeconomic strata express similar perceptions of the security situation, as shown in Figure 5. Thus, despite higher rates of (lethal) violence in poorer neighborhoods or communities, citizens express similar perceptions of safety in all neighborhoods. Both observations are consistent with rich citizens being more likely to observe poor signals of police trustworthiness holding fixed the underlying quality of policing.

Second, we consider measures of variation in trust in police by social class in Figure 9. This Figure shows that, across both proxies of socioeconomic status, the standard deviation of trust in police is *decreasing* in socioeconomic status. This pattern implies more variation in assessments of trust in police among poor than rich individuals. A similar pattern is evident in the US, though the standard deviation of trust in police is lower across the board than in most Latin American

countries. This decreasing variance is consistent with a pattern of updating in which the rich translate bad experiences with the police into poor signals of police trustworthiness with greater frequency than the poor.

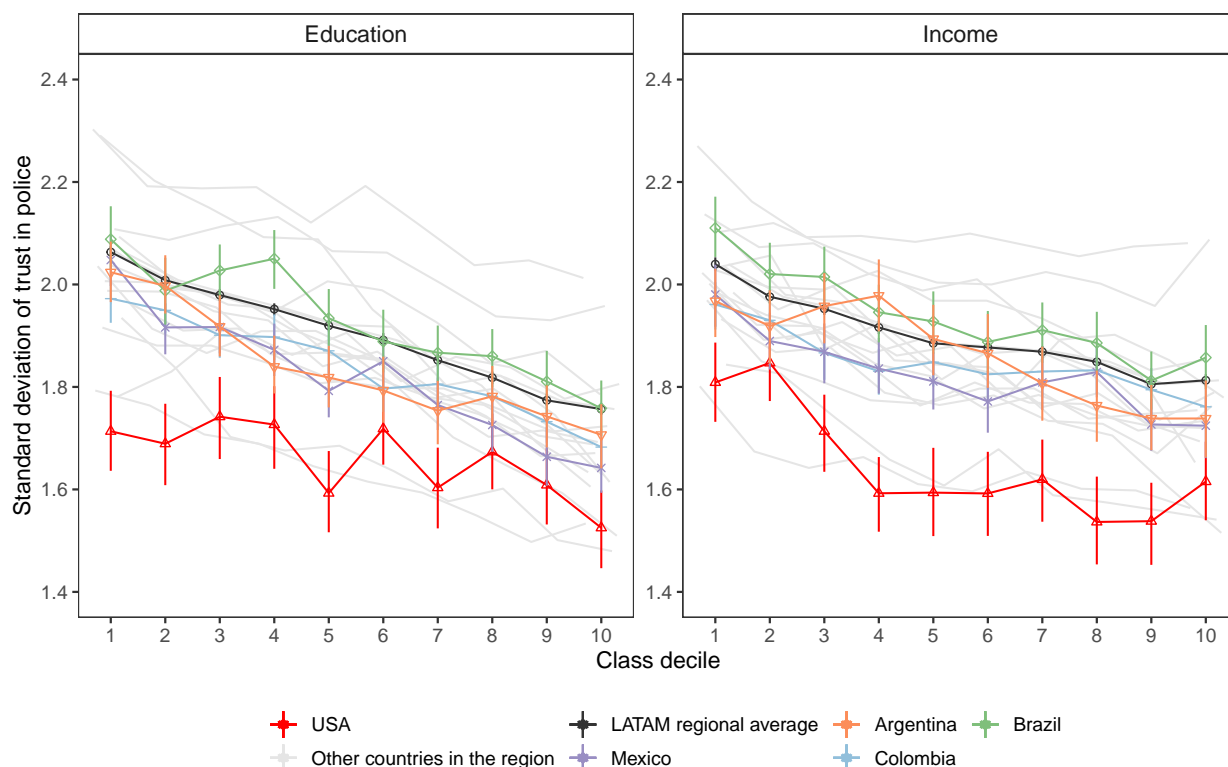


Figure 9: Figure shows the estimated standard deviation of trust in police by class decile for the country-specific and Latin America pooled samples and its the 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals.

One alternative interpretation of Figure 9, distinct from our argument about variation in the probability of translating experience or observation into a signal of police quality, is that the rich have more frequent contact with the police than the poor and thus can observe signals about their trustworthiness more frequently. However, in Figure A21 and A22 in the Appendix, we show suggestive evidence that the frequency of interaction with police does not appreciably vary with social class. In data from Medellín—in which all respondents are urban—reported contact rates with patrol officers do not vary in class (*estrato*). LAPOP offers a less direct test of the frequency of contact through estimated response time. We see limited differences between poor and rich

respondents, which vary substantially by country. As a result, our results in Figure 9 are unlikely to be generated by variation in the frequency of exposure to the police alone.

Importantly, Figure 9 suggests that, as in Latin America, the rich in the US similarly translate experience into signals of police (non)-trustworthiness with higher probability. Why would we observe differences in the gradient of trust in police in social class between the US and Latin America? If this behavioral mechanism predisposes the rich to negatively update more frequently than the poor, why is trust in police increasing in socioeconomic status in the US?

Per Figure 8, there exist two countervailing forces that translate experiences of police quality into signals of police trustworthiness. First, oft-documented disparities suggest that racial minorities and poor citizens receive poorer quality policing. In line with conventional wisdom, these disparities should produce a positive correlation between socioeconomic status and trust in police. Class-based differences in the quality of policing may be greater in the US than in Latin America, though we cannot test this directly. Second, we believe that it is conceivable that differences in the quality of police translate into signals about police trustworthiness differently for poor and rich US residents, in line with the right panel of Figure 8. As in Latin America, this mechanism should decrease the correlation between socioeconomic status and trust in police.

In comparing the rates of observed signals, Figure 5 suggests that policing outcomes are generally *better* in the US: crime victimization rates are lower for almost all citizens, more citizens feel secure in their neighborhoods, and bribe solicitation is nearly non-existent. If the quality of policing is generally higher in the US than in Latin America, fewer negative signals are perceived for citizens of all socioeconomic classes, attenuating the influence of the mechanism in the right panel of Figure 8, and supporting a stronger (positive) correlation between class and trust. To the extent that better signals (lower crime, less petty corruption) are more common, we should also see lower variance in trust in the US context, as in Figure 9.

Is the US exceptional for its positive correlation between class and trust in police, despite wealthier citizens' more stringent policing standards, or does this pattern generalize to similar contexts? We use the case of Canada to test for the possibility US exceptionalism. Figure A4

in the Appendix shows the results from analyses conducted with the Canadian LAPOP sample. Compared to the US and Latin America, Canadian respondents feel safest and, similarly to US respondents, have a near-zero probability of reporting crime victimization and being asked for a bribe. Unsurprisingly, trust in police is higher in Canada across all class deciles than in other countries in the sample. Consistent with our mechanism, however, the standard deviation of trust in police is lower than in the US and Latin America and *decreasing* in socioeconomic status. The overall result of the two countervailing forces is a positive trust in police-SES gradient in Canada as in the United States.¹²

6 Alternative explanations

In this section, we consider whether alternative explanations premised on the measurement of trust in police and its alternative conceptualizations could also account for the empirical patterns observed in the data. We consider three classes of alternative explanations: measurement concerns, institutional trust as a trait, and departures from Bayesian updating on police trustworthiness.

6.1 Artifacts of measurement

One possible cause of the divergence between experts' beliefs and what LAPOP survey data shows could be how class and trust are measured. Missingness may be correlated with socioeconomic status and trust in police.

We conduct a bounding exercise in Appendix A13 to assess the maximum extent to which missingness could bias our conclusions. To generate worst-case bounds, note that the correlation is bounded between -1 and 1. Since both trust in police and our measures of socioeconomic status are coded as Z -scores in (1), we can calculate these worst-case bounds for any respondent who reports at least one of the two measures. For this subset of missing observations (99.8% of all missing responses), we impute the observed Z -score for the missing Z -score (such that the imputed observation lies on the 45° line) to generate the worst-case upper bound. We then impute

¹²While the correlation between education and class is positive, only the correlation between self-reported income and trust in the police is statistically significant from zero at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level.

the negative of the observed Z -score (such that the imputed observation lies on the -45° line) to generate the worst-case lower bound. We estimate the correlation with all observed and imputed observations to generate worst-case bounds for the correlations reported in Figure 1. We estimate a worst-case bound using the education measure of $[-0.11, -0.05]$, suggesting that missingness can have only a minimal effect on our conclusions. The worst-case bounds for the income measure of social class are $[-0.22, 0.13]$. Given the different degrees of missingness, the width of these bounds is unsurprising. Nevertheless, it is useful to note that this worst-case upper bound on trust in the Latin American case is approximately equal to the estimated correlation between social class and trust in the United States (reported above), showing how different these empirical patterns are in practice.

Alternatively, one may be worried about the semantic content of respondents' opinions. While LAPOP does not offer any form of validation outside of each cross-sectional survey, we again draw upon findings from the panel surveys, which all use very similar question wordings (see Table A5). In a field experiment associated with the Medellín panel, Hanson, Kronick, and Slough (2024) find that survey-measured baseline trust in police predicts subsequent engagement with police. Specifically, they show that respondents who report the top category of trust in the police (out of four categories) in a baseline survey are more than twice as likely to attend community police meetings in beats assigned to treatment (18.4% vs. 8.4% of respondents). If survey measures of trust in the police were entirely random noise, we would not expect this alignment between reported trust and observed behavior. Further, trust in police in subsequent survey waves is highly (and positively) autocorrelated: 0.44 [95% CI: 0.42, 0.46] in Chilean panel data, 0.48 [95% CI: 0.44, 0.51] in Medellín, and 0.42 [95% CI: 0.41, 0.43] in Mexico. This offers further evidence that reported trust is not entirely noise.

6.2 Institutional trust as a trait

We have shown that in Latin America, trust in the police does not vary in class in the way most experts predicted. However, the alternative concepts of trust we described above may imply different predictions for the correlation between socioeconomic status and trust in police. If trust or

propensity for trust were a trait rather than a relational expectation of police behavior, our findings could be explained by a weakly negative correlation between this predisposition and class. We note that a negative correlation between trust predispositions and socioeconomic status would cut against notions that higher trust or social capital promotes economic advancement (e.g., Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti, 1993).

To examine the possibility that our results are driven by stable individual differences in LAPOP respondents' *trust propensities*, we estimate the intra-class correlation between each respondent's trust in multiple institutions: the army, political parties, the sitting president, the supreme court, the National Congress, and the police.¹³ The intra-class correlation gives the ratio of between-respondent variance to the total variance in trust in these institutions. If the ICC were close to 1, it would suggest limited variance in an individual's assessment of multiple institutions, suggesting that institutional trust functions as a stable trait or predisposition. However, we do not observe a high ICC. Across all subjects in the LAPOP surveys, we estimate an ICC of .05 (95% CI: [.02,.23]). Disaggregating by country in Figure A9, we show similarly small estimates in all countries. It is, therefore, unlikely that a stable individual-level predisposition to trust that correlates with socioeconomic status can explain away our results.

6.3 Beliefs vs. Preferences

We have argued that trust should be characterized as a belief, but skeptical readers may argue that it is, instead, a manifestation of a preference for policing. Moreover, psychology and political psychology literature argues for the plausibility of interaction between (prior) beliefs and preferences in the updating process (Kunda, 1987; Taber and Lodge, 2006; Little, Schnakenberg, and Turner, 2022). Specifically, trust's evolution could be subject to motivated reasoning, whereby trust becomes a function of an individual's prior preferences regarding policing (Ibid.). If this were the case, a respondent who prefers a policy that necessitates active police involvement may be motivated to hold more positive views of the police, thereby generating higher levels of trust in police,

¹³Figure A8 in the Appendix shows the raw institution-specific correlations for the Latin American pooled sample and benchmarks it with the US.

all else equal.

To gauge if respondents' beliefs about police trustworthiness may be shaped by their preferences over policing practices or policy, we characterize the relationship between socioeconomic status, self-described support for tough-on-crime or *mano dura* policing, and trust in police. Two expectations are worth clarifying. First, a motivated-reasoning or inference account of updating on police trustworthiness holds that pro-*mano dura* individuals have higher trust in police. Second, given the generally negative (if weak) correlations between socioeconomic status and trust in police reported in Figure 1, we would expect that the poor hold more favorable views of *mano dura* policies. The figure counters both expectations.

First, the left panel in Figure A23 in the Appendix shows a close-to-zero and *positive* correlation between income and support for tough-on-crime policing across all countries except Argentina and Uruguay. This finding is in line with recent research showing there is a positive relationship between (i) crime victimization and support for *mano dura* (Visconti, 2020) and (ii) income and urban property crime victimization (Gaviria and Pagés, 2002). The right panel in Figure A23 in the Appendix shows the predicted level of trust in police by class decile as a function of respondents' self-reported support for *mano dura*. The black line plots the expected level of trust in the police for respondents in each decile, and the blue line plots the conditional expectation for respondents in that decile who support *mano dura*. In contrast, the orange line plots the conditional expectation for respondents in that decile who are *unsupportive* of *mano dura*. As we can see, the expected level of trust for individuals supportive of *mano dura* is lower than for individuals unsupportive of the measure across all income levels. Additionally, trust decreases at similar rates for both groups. The results reveal the opposite empirical pattern we would expect to find if trust was largely driven by individuals' preferences, discounting the possibility of a motivated-reasoning explanation of our results.

7 Conclusion

Relationships and interactions between citizens and bureaucratic service providers help to shape access to and quality of services (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Our findings on citizen trust in police—an important case of these relationships— suggest that these may be more context-dependent than is generally acknowledged. Specifically, conventional wisdom from the US-centric literature and Latin America experts alike suggest that racially and socioeconomically marginalized populations have lower trust in police than their advantaged counterparts. This apparent conventional wisdom has been extended to other contexts by police agencies that design interventions to increase trust (Blair et al., 2021) and, as our forecasting exercise shows, expert beliefs about trust in police. We show that descriptively, a different pattern arises in Latin America as a whole and effectively all countries therein. Specifically, we find that trust in police is slightly decreasing in socioeconomic status: on average, the rich trust the police less than the poor.

Our finding of a negative trust-class gradient is important for considerations of the political economy of security provision in Latin America, the world’s most violent region. Poor assessments of police trustworthiness may motivate the rich to invest in private security (Jayadav and Bowles, 2006; Wilke, 2022). With this substitute, the rich who form a disproportionate share of the tax base (Bergolo, Londoño-Vélez, and Tortarolo, 2023)—may be less likely to support funding police, further inhibiting police performance. Moreover, strategies to increase trust in police by increasing service quality may be least effective among these citizens precisely because they are more likely to observe negative signals at any level of police quality. These implications of our findings merit further study in the Latin American context.

References

- Bateson, Regina. 2012. "Crime Victimization and Political Participation." *American Political Science Review* 106 (3): 570–587.
- Bergolo, Marcelo, Juliana Londoño-Vélez, and Darío Tortarolo. 2023. "Tax Progressivity and Taxing the Rich in Developing Countries: Lessons from Latin America." *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 39 (3): 530–549.
- Bhattacharya, Rajeev, Timothy M. Devinney, and Madan M. Pillutla. 1998. "A Formal Model of Trust Based on Outcomes." *The Academy of Management Review* 23 (3): 459–472.
- Blair, Graeme, Jeremy M. Weinstein, Fotini Christia, Eric Arias, Emile Badran, Robert A. Blair, Ali Cheema, Ahsan Farooqui, Thiemo Fetzer, Guy Grossman, Dotan Haim, Zulfiqar Hameed, Rebecca Hanson, Ali Hasanain, Dorothy Kronick, Benjamin S. Morse, Robert Muggah, Fatiq Nadeem, Lily L. Tsai, Matthew Nanes, Tara Slough, Nico Ravanilla, Jacob N. Shapiro, Barbara Silva, Pedro C. L. Souza, and Anna M. Wilke. 2021. "Community Policing Does Not Build Citizen Trust in Police or Reduce Crime in the Global South." *Science* 374 (6571).
- Brinks, Daniel M. 2007. *The Judicial Response to Police Killings in Latin America: Inequality and the Rule of Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brinks, Daniel M. 2019. "Access to What? Legal Agency and Access to Justice for Indigenous Peoples in Latin America." *The Journal of Development Studies* 55 (3): 348–365.
- Britto Ruiz, Diana, and Jorge Ordóñez Valverde. 2005. "Las prácticas de distinción social." *Polis. Revista Latinoamericana* (11).
- Caldeira, Teresa P. R. 2000. *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
URL: <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520221437/city-of-walls>
- Cantor, David, and James P. Lynch. 2000. *Self-Report Surveys as Measures of Crime and Criminal Victimization*. Rockville, MD: National Institute of Justice.
- Cao, Liqun, and Jihong Solomon Zhao. 2005. "Confidence in the Police in Latin America." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 33 (5): 403–412.
- Carr, Jillian, and Jennifer L. Doleac. 2016. "The Geography, Incidence, and Underreporting of Gun Violence: New Evidence Using Shotspotter Data."
- Citrin, Jack, and Laura Stoker. 2018. "Political Trust in a Cynical Age." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21: 49–70.
- COES, Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies. 2022. "Estudio Longitudinal Social de Chile 2016-2021."
- Corbacho, Ana, Julia Philipp, and Mauricio Ruiz-Vega. 2015. "Crime and Erosion of Trust: Evidence for Latin America." *World Development* 70: 400–415.
URL: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14001211>

- Córdova, Abby. 2009. "Measuring Relative Wealth Using Household Asset Indicators and Principal Component Analysis (PCA)." *AmericaBarometer Insights Series* .
- Decker, Scott H. 1981. "Citizen Attitudes Toward the Police: A Review of Past Findings and Suggestions for Future Policy." *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 9: 80–87.
- DellaVigna, Stefano, Devin Pope, and Eva Vivalt. 2019. "Predict Science to Improve Science." *Science (New York, N.Y.)* 366 (6464): 428–429.
- DellaVigna, Stefano, Nicholas Otis, and Eva Vivalt. 2020. "Forecasting the Results of Experiments: Piloting an Elicitation Strategy." *AEA Papers and Proceedings* 110: 75–79.
- Denny, Elaine K., David A. Dow, Wayne Pitts, and Erik Wibbels. 2023. "Citizen Cooperation with the Police: Evidence from Contemporary Guatemala." *Comparative Political Studies* 56 (7): 1072–1110.
URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140221139379>
- Eggers, Andrew C., Guadalupe Tuñón, and Allan Dafoe. 2024. "Placebo Tests for Causal Inference." *American Journal of Political Science* 68 (3): 1106–1121.
URL: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ajps.12818>
- Flores-Macías, Gustavo A., and Jessica Zarkin. 2021. "The Militarization of Law Enforcement: Evidence from Latin America." *Perspectives on Politics* 19 (2): 519–538.
- Gallup, Inc. 2021. "In U.S., Black Confidence in Police Recovers From 2020 Low." <https://news.gallup.com/poll/352304/black-confidence-police-recovers-2020-low.aspx>.
- Gasparini, Leonardo, and Nora Lustig. 2011. "The Rise and Fall of Income Inequality in Latin America." In *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American Economics*, ed. José Antonio Ocampo, and Jaime Ros. Oxford University Press.
- Gaviria, Alejandro, and Carmen Pagés. 2002. "Patterns of Crime Victimization in Latin American Cities." *Journal of Development Economics* 67 (1): 181–203.
- Gerbasi, Alexandra, and Karen Cook. 2009. "Trust." Oxford University Press pp. 218–241.
- Gerring, John. 2012. "Mere Description." *British Journal of Political Science* 42 (4): 721–746.
- González, Yanilda, and Lindsay Mayka. 2022. "Policing, Democratic Participation, and the Reproduction of Asymmetric Citizenship." *American Political Science Review* pp. 1–17.
- González, Yanilda María. 2020. *Authoritarian Police in Democracy: Contested Security in Latin America*. Cambridge University Press.
- Grossman, Guy, and Tara Slough. 2022. "Government Responsiveness in Developing Countries." *Annual Review of Political Science* 25: 131–153.
- Hanson, Rebecca, Dorothy Kronick, and Tara Slough. 2024. "Preaching to the Choir: A Problem of Participatory Interventions." *Journal of Politics* Forthcoming. Available at <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/732983>.

- Hardin, Russel. 2003. "Trust in Government." Russell Sage Foundation chapter 1, pp. 9–27.
- Heffernan, Audrey. 2024. Who Trusts the Police? Technical Report 164 LAPOP Lab, Vanderbilt University Nashville, TN: .
URL: https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/Insights164Heffernan_FINAL_EN.pdf
- Hoffman, Kelly, and Miguel Angel Centeno. 2003. "The Lopsided Continent: Inequality in Latin America." *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (1): 363–390.
- INEGI, Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía. 2024. "Encuesta Nacional de Seguridad Pública Urbana (ENSU)."
- Jaitman, Laura, Rodrigo Soares, Mauricio Olavarria-Gambi, and Roberto Guerrero Compeán. 2015. "The Welfare Costs of Crime and Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean."
- Jaitman, Laura, and Victoria Anauati. 2020. "The Dark Figure of Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean." *Journal of Economics, Race, and Policy* 3 (1): 76–95.
- Jayadav, Arjun, and Samuel Bowles. 2006. "Guard Labor." *Journal of Development Economics* 78 (2): 328–348.
- Johnson, Stephen, Johanna Mendelson Forman, and Katherine Bliss. 2012. Police Reform in Latin America: Implications for U.S. Polic. Technical report Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Karim, Sabrina. 2020. "Relational State Building in Areas of Limited Statehood: Experimental Evidence on the Attitudes of the Police." *American Political Science Review* 114 (2): 536–551.
- Kunda, Ziva. 1987. "Motivated Inference: Self-serving Generation and Evaluation of Causal Theories." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53 (4): 636–647.
- LAPOP, Lab. 2022. "The AmericasBarometer." www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop.
- Levi, Margaret, and Laura Stoker. 2000. "Political Trust and Trustworthiness." *Annual Review of Political Science* 3 (Volume 3, 2000): 475–507.
- Levine, Charles H., and Glenn Fisher. 1984. "Citizenship and Service Delivery: The Promise of Coproduction." *Public Administration Review* 44: 178–189.
- Little, Andrew T., Keith E. Schnakenberg, and Ian R. Turner. 2022. "Motivated Reasoning and Democratic Accountability." *American Political Science Review* 116 (2): 751–767.
- Liu, Licheng, Ye Wang, and Yiqing Xu. 2022. "A Practical Guide to Counterfactual Estimators for Causal Inference with Time-Series Cross-Sectional Data." *American Journal of Political Science* 68 (1): 160–176.
- Lupu, Noam, Mariana Rodríguez, Carole J. Wilson, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister. 2023. Pulse of Democracy. Technical report LAPOP Lab, Vanderbilt University Nashville, TN: . AmericasBarometer 2023.
URL: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ab2023/AB2023-Pulse-of-Democracy-final-20231127.pdf>

- Macdonald, John, and Robert J. Stokes. 2006. "Race, Social Capital, and Trust in the Police." *Urban Affairs Review* 41 (3): 358–375.
- Magaloni, Beatriz, Edgar Franco-Vivanco, and Vanessa Melo. 2020. "Killing in the Slums: Social Order, Criminal Governance, and Police Violence in Rio de Janeiro." *American Political Science Review* 114 (2): 552–572.
- Magaloni, Beatriz, and Luis Rodriguez. 2020. "Institutionalized Police Brutality: Torture, the Militarization of Security, and the Reform of Inquisitorial Criminal Justice in Mexico." *American Political Science Review* 114 (4): 1013–1034.
- Malone, Mary Fran T., and Lucia Dammert. 2021. "The Police and the Public: Policing Practices and Public Trust in Latin America." *Policing and Society* 31 (4): 418–433.
- Mondak, Jeffery J., Damaris Canache, Mitchell A. Seligson, and Matthew V. Hibbing. 2011. "The Participatory Personality: Evidence from Latin America." *British Journal of Political Science* 41 (1): 211–221.
- Muggah, Robert, and Katherine Tobon. 2018. "Citizen Security in Latin America: Facts and Figures." *Security Research Hub Reports* .
- Munger, Kevin, Andrew M. Guess, and Eszter Hargittai. 2021. "Quantitative Description of Digital Media: A Modest Proposal to Disrupt Academic Publishing." *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media* 1: 1–13.
- O'Donnell, Guillermo. 1999. "The (Un)Rule of Law and the Underprivileged in Latin America." Notre Dame Press chapter Polyarchies and the (un) rule of law in Latin America: A Partial Conclusion.
- Ojeda, Christopher. 2016. "The Effect of 9/11 on the Heritability of Political Trust." *Political Psychology* 37 (1): 73–88.
- Osorio, Javier, Livia I. Schubiger, and Michael Weintraub. 2018. "Disappearing Dissent? Repression and State Consolidation in Mexico." *Journal of Peace Research* 55 (2): 252–266.
- Ostrom, Elinor. 1996. "Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy, and Development." *World Development* 24 (6): 1073–1087.
- Phelps, Edmund. 1972. "The Statistical Theory of Racism and Sexism." *American Economic Review* 62: 659–61.
- Putnam, Robert D., Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Y. Nanetti. 1993. *Making Democracy Work : Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, UNITED STATES: Princeton University Press.
- PytlikZillig, Lisa M., and Christopher D. Kimbrough. 2016. "Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Trust: Towards Theoretical and Methodological Integration.". New York: Springer chapter Consensus on Conceptualizations and Definitions of Trust: Are We There Yet?, pp. 49–70.
- Skogan, W. G., and S. M. Hartnett. 1997. *Community Policing, Chicago Style*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Skogan, Wesley G. 1976. "Victimization Surveys and Criminal Justice Planning." *University of Cincinnati Law Review* 45 (2): 167–206.
- Skogan, Wesley G. 2005. "Citizen Satisfaction with Police Encounters." *Police Quarterly* 8 (3): 298–321.
- Slough, Tara, and Scott A. Tyson. 2023. "External Validity and Meta-Analysis." *American Journal of Political Science* 67 (2): 440–455.
- Soares, Rodrigo R., and Joana Naritomi. 2010. "Understanding High Crime Rates in Latin America: The Role of Social and Policy Factors." In *The Economics of Crime: Lessons For and From Latin America*. University of Chicago Press pp. 19–55.
- Sung, Hung-En, Joel Capellan, and Bryce Barthuly and. 2022. "Trust in the police and the militarisation of law enforcement in Latin America." *Policing and Society* 32 (3): 311–340.
URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2022.2037551>
- Taber, Charles S., and Milton Lodge. 2006. "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs." *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (3): 755–769.
- Tendler, Judith. 1997. *Good Governance in the Tropics*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Van Dijk, Jan. 2015. "The Case for Survey-Based Comparative Measures of Crime." *European Journal of Criminology* 12 (4): 437–456.
- Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vilalta, Carlos. 2020. "Violence in Latin America: An Overview of Research and Issues." *Annual Review of Sociology* 46 (1): 693–706.
- Villarreal, Andrés. 2010. "Stratification by Skin Color in Contemporary Mexico." *American Sociological Review* 75 (5): 652–678.
- Visconti, Giancarlo. 2020. "Policy Preferences after Crime Victimization: Panel and Survey Evidence from Latin America." *British Journal of Political Science* 50 (4): 1481–1495.
- Weitz-Shapiro, Rebecca, and Matthew S. Winters. 2017. "Can Citizens Discern? Information Credibility, Political Sophistication, and the Punishment of Corruption in Brazil." *The Journal of Politics* 79 (1): 60–74.
- Wilke, Anna M. 2022. *The Partisan Politics of Law Enforcement*. Working paper, available at https://anna-wilke.com/public_policing_private_security_Wilke.pdf.
- World Health Organization. 2014. *Global Status Report on Violence Prevention*. Geneva: World Health Organization.