

The popularity of heavy-handed policies

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By: Jonathan D. Rosen and Sebastián Cutrona

Latin America and the Caribbean has been dealing for years with an epidemic that is not that of the coronavirus. The high homicide rates in most countries in the region led the World Health Organization to classify this scourge as an epidemic. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), between 2000 and 2010 more than one million people died as a result of criminal violence. During these years, the homicide rate grew by almost 11%, registering more than 100,000 murders per year. In this framework, governments on both sides of the political spectrum have implemented security policies and “strong hand” strategies have become increasingly popular.

The tougher penalties, the discretionary use of force by the police, mass incarceration, and even the militarization of domestic politics have been some of the initiatives to address violence and feelings of insecurity. But according to different research, strong-arm policies, however, have a limited impact on homicide rates and crime levels in general.

Criminal networks have adapted to these strategies, becoming more violent and organized. Some studies also point out that the heavy-handed policies implemented in the region during the last decades have undermined democracy in different ways. In this context, why is the strong hand still so popular despite the ample evidence against it?

Brazil and Colombia

As in other countries, perceptions of insecurity in Brazil and Colombia favored the election of right-wing candidates who came to power underpinned by radical anti-crime proposals. In 2018, Colombians voted for Iván Duque, who promised to relaunch many of the strategies implemented by former President Álvaro Uribe, so that his country's criminals would be clear from day one that "whoever does them pays for them." That same year, Brazil elected Jair Bolsonaro, who in addition to praising the decades of military dictatorship, assured without hesitation that with his plan criminals "would die in the street like cockroaches."

In our [research article recently published in *Trends in Organized Crime*](#), using data from Vanderbilt University's Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), we revealed that crime victimization and ideology are not factors. relevant factors that allow predicting support for heavy-handed policies in Brazil and Colombia.

Crime rates in both countries do not directly influence the punitive preferences of the population. Endorsement of the strong hand seems to be related to emotional factors such as fear of crime. Conservative voters, on the other hand, are not necessarily more punitive, because support for a strong hand runs across the entire ideological spectrum. Likewise, people who support the Armed Forces, an institution that enjoys high levels of trust in both countries, are more likely to favor extreme measures in the matter.

Despite the choices of voters in Brazil and Colombia, the underlying socioeconomic determinants behind the growing popularity of these measures are not the same in both countries. In Brazil, the political regime seems not to be a priority if the government tackles crime, as both people who support democracy and those who defend the military regime agree that penalties for crimes should be increased.

Interestingly, the Brazilian case also reveals that the demands for a strong hand grow among those with higher levels of education and monthly family income. This suggests that punitive preferences are linked to social class.

In Colombia, by contrast, people who believe that democracy is the best system of government are mostly in favor of the strong hand. This explains why Colombians are unwilling to sacrifice democracy to fight crime despite their punitive preferences.

Furthermore, the research results also indicate that older people and those residing in rural areas are more likely to support extreme measures. While aging appears to be associated with lower risks of victimization as older people witnessed the violence of the “war on drugs” during the 1980s and 1990s, punitivism in rural areas is likely associated with high levels of drug trafficking and guerrilla organizations.

Colombians and Brazilians share a great concern about crime and insecurity, and the citizens of both countries are willing to take drastic measures. The rise of Bolsonaro and Duque, as in other countries in the region during the last decade, can be understood as a response to public opinion and the growing popularity of punitivism. This in a context where the traditional party system and political ideologies lose relevance in the face of perceptions of insecurity.

On the other hand, high levels of trust in the Armed Forces have accelerated the militarization of domestic security despite human rights violations and negative consequences for democracy. Just a few decades after the democratization process that

characterized Latin America, the scenarios in Colombia and Brazil illustrate many of the dilemmas facing the region today.

Jonathan D. Rosen is Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at Holy Family University in Philadelphia, United States of America.

Sebastián Cutrona is Assistant Professor of International Affairs at OP Jindal Global University in Sonapat, India