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DILEMMAS OF REFORM

Crime, Policing, and Public Opinion in Venezuela

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In the previous chapter, Luis Gerardo Gabaldón provided a detailed review of the Chávez government's efforts to reduce crime and violence through various citizen security reforms and some of the challenges that impeded their consolidation. Previous research in the region has focused on police resistance (see Denyer Willis 2015) or resistance by elites (Cruz 2011) to understand why reforms have tended to remain fragile or fall apart. In this chapter we use survey data complemented by ethnographic observations to show how public opinion on crime and policing created an adverse terrain for reform. As several researchers have pointed out, the Venezuelan public tended not to hold the Chávez government responsible for crime. We suggest this was because most people saw crime as the result of a lack of values in the home, rather than faulty public policy. As a result, there was no significant or sustained popular demand for the government to take action in the realm of citizen security.

In 2006, however, news coverage of officers' participation in crime and acts of egregious violence motivated action, laying the groundwork for police reform. Reception of this reform was complicated by political polarization. While government supporters were more likely to support security reforms rolled out by the government, government opponents tended not to support them. However, when asked about one of the key

aspects of the reforms—regulating the use of force—government supporters were actually less likely to support it than government opponents. Although support for heavy-handed policing is often associated with right-wing political parties and affiliation, this support may not be specific to right-wing political ideology.

In short, public opinion put police reformers between a rock and a hard place. With no significant demand for police reform, an opposition that rejected any initiative proposed by the Chavista-controlled government, and a lack of support for one of reform's core tenets within the Chavista base, the rollback of civilian police reform faced little resistance.

THE EVERYDAY ETIOLOGY OF CRIME IN VENEZUELA

During the first eight years of Hugo Chávez's administration, the government focused on social and economic policies meant to address poverty and inequality. It paid little to no attention to rising crime and violence, largely due to the assumption that these would be addressed through improvements in social and economic policy. This assumption was guided by a classic interpretation of Marxism sometimes referred to as "functionalism of the left" (Antillano 2015). In this view the roots of crime and violence are the poverty, inequality, and limited life opportunities caused by capitalism. From this perspective the police are only necessary because of the existence of these social problems and, thus, were ignored for many years.

While the Chávez government actually had significant success in addressing both poverty and inequality, violent crime soared. Even so, the government had little reason to take it seriously, as opinion polls showed Chávez did not pay a political price for it. Polling throughout the Chávez period show that he did not "own" problems with crime and violence in the same way he owned problems such as inflation and unemployment (Smilde 2012). Dorothy Kronick (2014, 2) also suggests that under Chávez Venezuelan voters did "not punish incumbents for increases in murder incidence, despite high awareness of and intense concern about citizen security." Although there is an extensive body of scholarship on the relationship between crime, victimization, and trust in state institutions (see, for example, Bateson 2012; Malone 2010; Seligson and Booth 2010), the relationship between crime and voting preferences as well as support for political parties remains unclear. Nevertheless, Venezuela does not seem to be an anomaly in this regard. John Marshall (2018) shows that in Mexico, while awareness of recent violent incidents before elections can reduce support for incumbents in municipal elections, voters tend not to punish higher levels of govern-

Which of the following do you consider the primary cause of crime in Venezuela? (October 2015)

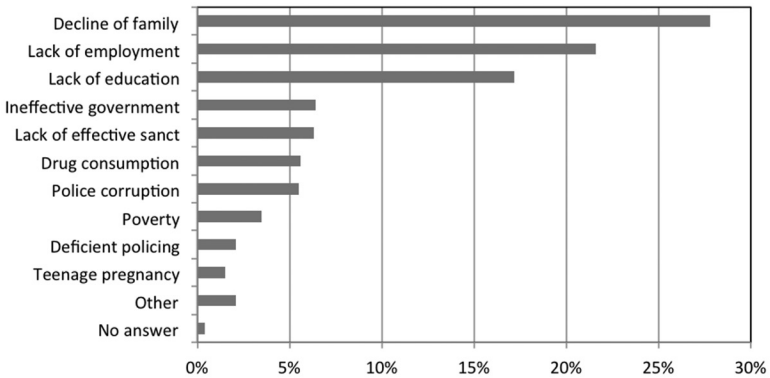


FIGURE 7.1. Cause of delinquency, first answer.

ment; nor do long-run homicide trends significantly impact electoral performance.

While Chávez's popularity was closely tied to economic issues, like unemployment and inflation, survey data show that his popularity was not affected by citizens' top concern—crime. This does not mean that citizens rewarded him for high crime, but that they did not hold him responsible for it (Smilde 2012). A 2009 question from a nationwide poll showed that almost 60 percent of the population thought the problem of crime was so complex no president could solve it. The same question in 2013 showed virtually identical numbers (Hanson and Smilde 2013; see also Kronick 2014).

Why would this be the case? Why did voters not hold a government accountable for a problem that worsened each year under its watch? We argue that Venezuelans tend to see crime and violence principally as the product of a lack of values taught in the home, followed by a lack of life opportunities and education. During her ethnographic research, Rebecca Hanson found that residents in the lower- and working-class neighborhoods where she conducted research believed that the most important changes that needed to take place were “in the home and the family.” We corroborated this with quantitative data by asking respondents to select the top three factors they believed were the principal causes of crime in the country.

The purported lack of values in the home and decline of the family (28 percent) is by far the most popular first choice in explaining “delinquency.” This is followed by a lack of employment (22 percent) and

education (17 percent). Together, police corruption and deficiencies in policing make up less than 10 percent of respondents' first choice explanation, while ineffective government only gets 6.4 percent (although unemployment and a lack of educational opportunities could certainly be seen as the results of ineffective government).

Before the police, the government, or the criminal justice system, the family is the institution to which more people look to both explain and resolve crime. A question that asked respondents to select the top three most important factors for fighting crime provided similar results, with 67 percent of respondents answering that improving the values taught by the family is that best way to combat crime. Figure 7.1 shows the percent of respondents who chose "improving values in the home" first. Identifying factors outside of the state as the best ways to fight crime are relatively uniform across the political spectrum. If we look at the total mentions of values in the home as the main way to combat crime, we see that a majority of Chavistas, government opponents, and neither-nors (those who neither identify with Chavismo nor the opposition) view this as one of the top three most important ways to fight crime. Within a highly politicized context, this seems to be one of the few issues respondents agreed on, across the political spectrum—71 percent of Chavistas, 66 percent of opponents, and 68 percent of neither-nors identified this as one of the top three most important ways to fight crime.

This focus on the family and weakening values as the most important causes of crime helps to explain why the government has never paid politically for crime. Although we do not suggest that this explanation for crime emerged during the Chávez era, the government certainly played a role in promoting this interpretation. Andrés Antillano (2012, 713) has written that due to the lackluster results of strategies to attack crime through structural changes, the government has increasingly turned to the issue of "values" of society—such as capitalism, egoism, and the search for quick and fast money—as the principal cause of crime. It is likely that many Venezuelans, particularly government supporters, thought that since the government had so vocally declared war on what it saw as the roots of crime, shortcomings of the people must be to blame.

This perception effectively privatizes and depoliticizes the issue of crime, holding individuals and families—rather than political and economic structures—responsible for "delinquency."¹ The moral explanation of crime assumes that the answer to crime is cultural reform "or the neutralization, reeducation, and rehabilitation of 'contaminated' subjects" (Antillano 2012, 714). There is also a clear gender bias in the way in which blame is assigned. In the Venezuelan context, "the family"

often boils down to single mothers, meaning that women are more likely to be blamed when their children commit a crime (Zubillaga et al. 2015). Indeed, in everyday discourse people often blame poor, single mothers for “not doing their jobs” when discussing why crime has increased in the country. Rather than looking to the government, Venezuelans are more likely to attribute crime to those hit hardest by decades of neoliberalization and marginalization by the state: poor women of color living in highly disadvantaged communities.

POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND CITIZEN SECURITY REFORM

With public perceptions of crime and violence focused on the family rather than the police or government, public opinion was not an important incentive for citizen security reform. Instead, the latter emerged from public outcry over police abuse, catalyzed by a succession of events—including officers’ participation in the murder of the Faddoul brothers, the kidnapping and killing of businessman Filippo Sindoni, and the killing of university students at a police checkpoint in Caracas (see chapter 6)—which brought the police’s participation in crime into the spotlight. It was not demands for more effective police forces per se that led to police reform then, but collective shock over their contribution to Venezuela’s violence. In response, the Chávez government formed the National Commission on Police Reform (Comisión Nacional para la Reforma Policial, CONAREPOL), charging it with researching Venezuela’s police forces and recommending a strategy for reform.

Over a period of nine months the commission compiled financial, organizational, and human resource information about police in the country through interviews, surveys, and national hotlines. In the first phase of the investigation, 57,240 people participated. Police officers were also consulted, including officers from twenty-four state police forces and ninety-nine municipal police forces. Using this data, the CONAREPOL produced a proposal for reform. Despite facing significant opposition from within the governing coalition, in 2008 a law on policing was proposed in the National Assembly.² This law provided a roadmap for the creation of a General Police Council (Consejo General de Policía, CGP); a legal structure for police governance; a national police force, the Bolivarian National Police (Policía Nacional Bolivariana, PNB); and a new educational curriculum for a new system of higher education: the Universidad Nacional Experimental de la Seguridad (UNES). Screening procedures ensured that many officers from the former Metropolitan Police were unable to transfer, as reformers attempted to purge officers with violations and misconduct on their record.

One of the most promising aspects of these initiatives was that some of the main actors in the police reform were human rights activists who had spent decades denouncing and fighting against police abuse. Soraya El Achkar was named the executive secretary of the transition and would eventually become both the executive secretary of the CGP and the rector of the new UNES. Human rights group Red de Apoyo para la Justicia y la Paz developed the human rights curriculum around a non-repressive model of policing and provided human rights education to officers in training. Venezuela's police forces are infamous for their excessive use of force (Antillano 2010; Birkbeck and Gabaldón 2005), and militarized policing has a long history in the country (see the introduction and chapters 6 and 8). Working under the assumption that police violence was itself a significant source of violence more broadly, reformers made the progressive and differential use of force a main tenet of this new model (El Achkar 2012; Gabaldón 2013; Antillano and Ávila n.d.).³

Even so, a focus on investing in the police was controversial within a government that had adopted "twenty-first-century socialism" as its guiding metaphor. Some officials and politicians dismissed police reform as "right-wing," leading reformers to frame their focus as "humanist" and "socialist." Training manuals, classroom teaching, and university rhetoric promoted the PNB as institutions of social justice that would fight against inequality and empower the poor. While the original version of the policing law simply referred to the National Police, the final version, passed in December 2009, changed the name to the Bolivarian National Police to indicate that they were part of transformative political project.

In 2012 El Achkar (2012a) wrote that the new model of security represented a break from the repressive past and a move toward a model of security that protected the most vulnerable as well as empowering them to become a solution to the problem of violence and crime. New training materials published by the CGP issued this statement at the front: "[The police in this new model] is an armed institution whose arms are not used against the people but for their protection . . . [it] does not criminalize the poor or take actions that re-victimize them. On the contrary, it is partial to popular sectors as they are the most affected by the phenomenon of violence."

The police reform was followed by broader security reforms. In May 2011 President Chávez inaugurated the Presidential Commission for the Control of Firearms, Ammunition, and Disarmament (Comisión Presidencial para el Control de Armas, Municiones y Desarme, CPCAD), overseen by the Ministry of Justice, which named human rights activist Pablo Fernandez of the Red de Apoyo as the executive secretary. The CPCAD worked to develop a comprehensive plan that would limit ac-

cess to guns as well as regulate ammunition, most of which is manufactured by the Venezuelan military. In 2012 Chávez announced the unification of the various citizen security initiatives into the *Gran Misión A Toda Vida Venezuela* (Great Mission Full Life Venezuela). These reform initiatives were also accompanied by dozens of cultural and social initiatives founded or funded by the government, with the goal of creating a “culture of peace,” and emphasized that crime and violence were not to be combatted exclusively through the criminal justice system.

The Chávez government, then, did not renounce the classic leftist interpretation of crime as the product of poverty and inequality in its reforms. Rather, specific factions within the government developed a framework of “integral” and “humanist” citizen security, which integrated classic elements of civilian police reform—such as human rights training and the standard of progressive and differential use of force—with the existing discourse on crime and violence. They developed a leftist approach to crime and violence, which promoted an understanding of crime as multi-causal and not simply an issue for the police or criminal justice system to address.

However, police reform was vigorously opposed by military and state actors (Hanson and Smilde 2014) and had to compete with militarized initiatives created alongside the new approach to policing. In 2010 the Bicentennial Security Force (*Dispositivo Bicentenario de Seguridad, DIBISE*) was inaugurated, putting National Guard soldiers in the street to carryout police functions. DIBISE functioned primarily through setting up checkpoints where people and vehicles were stopped and documents checked—ineffectual practices that had been the cornerstone of Venezuelan policing for decades—and through special raids such as the *Madrugonazo al Hampa* (Dawn Raid on Crime), which sent National Guard soldiers into high-crime neighborhoods to arrest suspected criminals and search their homes without warrants or the presence of a public defender. Nevertheless, by the time Hugo Chávez was reelected in 2012, civilian citizen security reform seemed to be gaining a decisive upper hand.

This did not last long, however. In October 2012 Chávez designated Minister of Justice Tareck El Aissami to be a candidate for governor of the state of Aragua and put a military officer in his place. El Aissami was one of the main proponents of the civilian character of the police reform. In March 2013 Hugo Chávez died, and Nicolas Maduro, while not explicitly rejecting them in the beginning, rolled back many of the civilian police reforms. In part this was because the various reform efforts had not reduced crime (although given inconsistent and sporadic implementation, the military’s continued participation in citizen security, and the

short period of time in which they were expected to produce results, this is unsurprising). Using data from the health ministry, Josbelk Gonzalez and Dorothy Kronick show in chapter 1 that the violent death rate⁴ climbed gradually between 2003 and 2013, reaching a high of 69.5 per 100,000 in 2012. Even using official statistics, the homicide rate had risen to 56 per 100,000 that year.⁵

Considering that Maduro lacked Chávez's history with the military, he had another powerful incentive for rolling back civilian control of policing—to consolidate his support within this institution. Indeed, during his first month in office Maduro announced the creation of the Plan Patria Segura, which would, once again, put the National Guard in charge of checkpoints and roadblocks to try to control crime (Smilde and Pérez Hernáiz 2013). In January 2014, after the outcry over the murder of former Miss Venezuela Monica Spear, Maduro announced the replacement of activists Soraya El Achkar and Pablo Fernandez in the UNES and the CGP by military officers. And in July 2015 the Maduro government unveiled the most militarized plan of all. Operation Liberation of the People (Operación de Liberación del Pueblo, OLP), sent “heavily-armed police and military forces to reclaim the state’s monopoly of violence over poor areas supposedly under the control of armed non-state actors” (Pérez Hernáiz and Smilde 2015).

Reformers not only had to overcome internal resistance but also faced the problem of winning over public favor. They had to defend the new emphasis on human rights and professionalized policing against critics who claimed that the new model would turn the police into the *mano blandengue* (wimpy hand) of the state. Officers of the Bolivarian National Police were often described by people as a nice group of kids whose “soft” character did not demand the respect necessary to “make Venezuelans listen.” Moreover, political polarization prevented the articulation of necessary support for civilian reform and for one of police reform’s key tenets: limitations on the use of force. Politicization impeded consolidation as it divided public opinion in such a way that left no significant base of support for it. Thus, when looking for a way to shore up support with his base and within the military, Maduro faced little resistance when he rolled back and then replaced civilian police reform altogether.

WHO SUPPORTED THE REFORMS AND WHY?

Political Polarization

It was not citizen concern for crime that drove the government to take on police reform; polls showed that Hugo Chávez did not suffer politically from rising crime and violence, and that citizens did not tend to

TABLE 7.1. Evaluation of reform by SES

	Upper-middle (%)	Middle class (%)	Lower/working class (%)	Poor (%)
Reforms are good	31	35	46	48
Reforms will not work	62	54	43	37

TABLE 7.2. Evaluation of reform by political affiliation

	Pro-government (%)	Opposition (%)	Neither-nor (%)
Reforms are good	75	17	37
Reforms will not work	15	73	48

see crime as the result of public policy shortcomings. Rather, reform emerged in response to outcry over cases of police abuse and violence. It was carried out by a cadre of criminology and human rights professionals who sought to push forward a civilian model of policing and move away from Venezuela's tradition of militarized policing. This was a tenuous project from the beginning due to internal struggles between government factions.

Political affiliation is an important variable in explaining support for reforms in Venezuela. Overall, the police reform was supported by those who identified as *Chavista* and opposed by those who identified with the opposition—as might be expected for a major government initiative in a polarized context. But the situation gets even more complicated when we dig further and ask who was more likely to favorably view a main tenet of the reform—regulating the use of force. The result was a context in which police reformers had support from within their coalition for the overall project, but not for the central aspect of it.

Support for Reforms

In an August 2013 nationwide poll, we asked a blanket question regarding police reform. Respondents were asked: “In the past few years the government has put various citizen security reforms in place, including the police reform and the presidential disarmament commission. Which of the following opinions is closest to yours?”

The responses showed substantial support for the new model but also substantial opposition.⁶ While 45 percent supported it, 43 percent opposed it. Impressively, almost 90 percent of the population knew of

TABLE 7.3. Approval of security reforms

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Ages 18–35	.100	.101	.100	.083	.064	.081
Male		.167*	.165*	.156	.146	.087**
Barrio			.421***	.324**	.328**	.353
Lower class				.141***	.130***	-.003
High school or less					.049	.030
Chavista						1.708***
Opposition						-.475***
Adjusted R ²	.001	.003	.004	.02	.02	.34

Note: The unit of analysis is the individual

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

the reform. But who supports these reforms? We anticipated that class and political affiliation would be particularly salient factors in explaining support for reforms. A cross tabulation of within-class opinions on the reform does indicate that lower class (46 percent) and poor Venezuelans (48 percent) are more supportive of the reforms than those in the middle (35 percent) and upper classes (31 percent). Indeed, when we look at political affiliation, more pro-government than opposition supporters evaluated the reforms positively (75 percent versus 17 percent). While more neither-nors than opposition supporters evaluated the reforms positively (37 percent), the majority had a negative opinion of the reforms (48 percent).

We now turn to a logit model including all of the variables in the dataset that we anticipated might explain support, or lack of support, for reforms.⁷ In the following models we use *lower class* to refer to those included in SES groups D (working class) and E (poor).⁸ Remaining true to its use in Venezuela, *barrio* refers to residents of popular sectors, a category constructed using the survey enumerator's response to the following question: Was the zone where the house is located formally planned or developed informally?

Class, political affiliation, and gender are the only variables that emerge as statistically significant in the final model. While in model 5 class and neighborhood type are statistically significant, these only explain only 2 percent of approval of reform. Once political affiliation is added in, our adjusted R² reaches 34 percent, showing that political affiliation is a key variable in explaining approval of the reform. In fact, once political affiliation is included, the significance of class and neigh-

TABLE 7.4. Approval of PNB

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
35 or under	-.048	-.047	-.078	-.099	-.122	.001
Male		.085	.072	.079	.066	-.047
Barrio			.646***	.545***	.529***	.223
Lower class				.456***	.393*	.202
High school or less					.289*	.106
Chavista						1.895***
Opposition						-.295**
Adjusted R ²	.000	.001	.03	.03	.04	.29

Note: The unit of analysis is the individual

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

neighborhood type washes out, suggesting that they are actually measuring political affiliation.⁹ Gender also remains statistically significant in the final model, with men more likely to approve of reforms than women.

The same can be seen with support for the National Police. In November 2013 we asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following statement: “The National Police is the security force most capable of combating crime.”

Though neighborhood type, class, and education level all emerge as statistically significant between models 3 and 5, once we add in political affiliation the significance of all of these other variables disappears. And, once we add in political affiliation in model 6, the variance explained jumps from 4 percent to 29 percent. As can be seen in model 6, Chavistas are much more likely to support the National Police than the reference category (neither-nors) (1.895), while opposition supporters are less likely to support the National Police in comparison to neither-nors (-.295).¹⁰

Our findings on public opinion of reform are not surprising. Like most of the Chávez government’s initiatives, police reform was viewed positively by government supporters and negatively by government opponents.

Support for Limiting Use of Force

The challenge facing police reformers becomes clearer when we look at opinions of a fundamental aspect of the reform. As mentioned earlier, a principal tenet of the new model was the regulation and reduction of the use of force by police officers. Regulating officers’ use of force received mixed support, however, not only from state actors but citizens as well.

TABLE 7.5. Agree/disagree that limiting police force limits their ability to fight crime

	Chavista (%)	Opposition (%)	Neither-nor (%)
Agree	49	38	38
Disagree	27	45	37
Neither	18	13	17
No answer	6	4	8

To gauge this support, we asked people, “How much do you agree with the following statement?: ‘Limiting the actions and force that the police can use limits their ability to fight crime.’” Compared to 35 percent who disagreed, 42 percent of respondents agreed that limiting police action and force limits officers’ ability to fight crime.

Given the politicization of attitudes toward reform that we saw earlier, we would expect a similar split between pro-government and government opponents on this question, with a majority of Chavistas supporting the limiting of officers’ use of force. However, when broken down by political affiliation, opposition supporters are actually more likely to disagree with the statement, while Chavistas are more likely to agree with it. In other words, government opponents are more likely to support regulation of the use of force while Chavistas are more likely to see it impeding the ability of police to fight crime. These findings differ from previous research, which has shown that right-wing politicians and parties (Ahen 2007) and politically conservative individuals (Braithwaite 1997) are more likely to support punitive policies and policing. Instead, our findings show that supporters of the left-wing government were more likely to support unregulated use of force in order to fight crime.

Here again, to get a closer look we analyze the data using a logistic regression. In the final model both education and political affiliation remain statistically significant. Neighborhood type is statistically significant, with those living in a barrio more likely to agree with the statement, until political affiliation is added to the model. In model 6 we see that when compared with those who have a technical university degree or higher, those who have a high school degree or less are more likely to agree with the statement that limiting use of force limits their ability to fight crime; this relationship becomes weaker when we add in political affiliation in model 6. In the final model we see that Chavistas are more likely to agree (.43) when compared to the reference category (neither-nor) and the opposition are less likely to agree (-.196). This model explains less variation than previous ones. When we add in education and political affiliation the R^2 increases, but still only explains 3 percent

TABLE 7.6. Agree with statement

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
35 or under	-.138	-.138	-.147	-.146	-.168	-.156
Male		.020	.023	.022	.033	.048
Barrio			.214*	.223*	.224*	.204
Lower class				-.034	-.119	-.162
High school or less					.332***	.290*
Chavista						.430***
Opposition						-.196*
Adjusted R ²	.002	.002	.004	.004	.013	.026

Note: The unit of analysis is the individual

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

of variance. Despite the relatively low adjusted R², the model shows that political affiliation and education are statistically significant factors in predicting approval or disapproval of regulated use of force.

The findings regarding pro-government respondents are consistent with Hanson's fieldwork. Conversations she had with Chavistas were dominated by concerns about the PNB—like the ones mentioned above on age, maturity, and strength—and the practicality of human rights-oriented reforms within the Venezuelan context. In meetings of Citizen Police Oversight Committees, created by the reform to provide external oversight of the police and whose participants were overwhelmingly Chavista, said that the new model was “beautiful” but impractical. In a conversation between a committee member and a state representative, when the representative was explaining the model of differential and progressive use of force, one of the committee members interrupted to ask, “Do you know when the police started losing respect? When they started talking about human rights.”

A growing body of research has begun to analyze why those more vulnerable to repressive policing (the poor and working classes) are also likely to support it (Auyero and Sobering 2019; Goldstein 2012). Some scholars have pointed to the ways in which violence has saturated daily life within marginalized populations to such a degree that state violence appears necessary to fight insecurity (see Alves and Evanson 2011; Rotker and Goldman 2002; Arias and Goldstein 2010). Jennifer Pearce (2017, 133) argues that histories of social authoritarianism and patterns of violence diffusion in Latin America nurture “authoritarian subjectivi-

ties.” The struggle for citizenship is not only vis-à-vis the state but is also “amongst fellow citizens themselves, fueled by insecure environments generated by state action and inaction.” Roberto Briceño-León (2017) argues that the poor tend to disproportionately favor use of force since they are the ones who are most affected by crime.

Our research suggests that support for unregulated police force has more to do with political affiliation and education than living in a barrio or being a part of the lower class (Sanjuán 2008).¹¹ Even when analyzing the responses for only poor opposition and poor Chavistas, the difference between Chavistas and opposition is still notable—more poor Chavistas disagree with limiting force (74 percent) than poor opposition (56 percent).¹² This research suggests that although often associated with right-wing politics (Swanson 2013; Holland 2013), support for harsher approaches to crime fighting may also fit into left political projects.

Why might government supporters be more likely to approve of unregulated force? Some scholars attribute support for punitive policies to politicians’ rhetoric (Baumer, Messner, and Rosenfeld 2003). Yet, while he supported militarized alternatives to police reform, Chávez’s public discourse regarding policing did not promote violent, repressive measures—in fact, he criticized them as a hangover from the *cuarta republica* (i.e., the political period before the approval of the 1999 Constitution) and instead argued that crime should be dealt with by attacking poverty and inequality. In other words, while policies to address insecurity were inconsistent and contradictory throughout Chávez’s time in office—as mentioned previously, he supported the DIBISE in parallel to the newly created National Police—his rhetoric was much more consistent. Thus it seems unlikely that political rhetoric would help explain the tendency to support violent policing among supporters.

It could also be that Chavistas were more likely to believe that alternative means to reduce crime and violence (e.g., social welfare programs) had already been implemented by the government to no avail, thus harsher measures were needed to complement the integral approach to crime. Indeed, compared to opposition supporters, Chavistas were more likely to live in popular sectors, areas where they would have been more likely to see evidence of government initiatives to reduce poverty and provide education. Thus, while they support these initiatives, they might see that that they have not reduced crime and could have been more likely to believe that the government must complement them with tough-on-crime policies. It could also be that the populist “us versus them” discourse of Chavismo supports an authoritarian view of deviance and responses to it. This rhetoric became even more evident under Maduro, as criminals became positioned as threats to the revolution rather

than victims of a capitalist system (Hanson et al. 2017). It is also possible that opposition supporters associated “the police” with what they saw as a repressive government and were therefore in favor of limiting their use of violence. Finally, it could be that Chavistas are more likely to be poor and live in areas where violent crime is more common, as personal experiences with victimization has been correlated with support for harsher approaches to insecurity (Pérez 2003; Krause 2014) (though other scholars have cast doubt on this association; see Tiscornia et al. 2020). Unfortunately, we do not have questions in the data set to include these variables. Only further research would be able to determine the plausibility of these explanations.

CONCLUSION

The public has often been described as hostile to criminal justice reforms and willing to sacrifice rights for security (Bolívar 1999; Goldstein 2012; Duce and Pérez Perdomo 2003). This research suggests that widespread public support for *mano dura* policies in response to a perceived or real increase in insecurity is a key impediment to reform. Indeed, *mano dura* policies have been portrayed as unifying support for governments that seek to appear tough on crime. Alisha Holland (2013) has argued that, lacking a pro-poor policy platform, it is precisely the appeal to lower-class voters that drove right-wing politicians in El Salvador to champion *mano dura* policies; this strategy allowed them to secure votes across classes.

Our research fills in and complicates this picture. First, our data show that people tend to think of crime as the result of shortcomings of families and households, not public policy. As a result, citizen concern for crime did not negatively affect Hugo Chávez's job approval; this is likely one reason his government did very little to address it during his first seven years in office. Second, support for security reforms was heavily shaped by political affiliation, making it difficult to garner the societal support necessary to consolidate them. Those who were actually open to supporting the content of the reforms supported the opposing political coalition. And reformers' base of support in the Chávez coalition did not support what was perhaps the central element of the police reform: restricting and regulating the use of force. In short, political affiliation trumped policy preferences. Ethnographic research across Latin America has demonstrated the capacity of pluralized violence to generate authoritarian political subjectivities; these findings suggest that we must attend to how these articulate within both right- and left-wing ideologies.

Due to both internal conflict and fractured public support, support for the reforms analyzed in this chapter never fully consolidated, not even among government supporters. Chávez's passing, then, sounded their death knell. In the following years his successor turned instead to militarized initiatives to both combat crime and consolidate his coalition. Rolling back civilian police reform and throwing his full support behind militarized security tactics provided Nicolás Maduro with a strategy to shore up support within both the military and a base that was never convinced by the "socialist-humanist" model. The balancing act was over, replaced by full-fledged support for state repression that resulted in the most violent period of policing in the country's history.

APPENDIX: REGRESSION VARIABLES

Age

Individuals were grouped into age ranges of 18–35 and 36–60+. Given that individuals (particularly poor men) between the ages of 18 and 35 are the main victims of violence and police brutality, it is possible that younger respondents would be more likely to support reforms—especially those reducing police use of force—than older respondents.

Education

Individuals were grouped into two categories by their education: high school or less and technical schools/college/graduate. While it is possible that those with a higher level of education would be more likely to support regulating police use of force, those with lower levels of education are more likely to live in poor areas where police brutality most often occurs. Thus, we were interested in discovering the direction of the relationship between education and opinions on reforms, particularly those that regulated police use of force.

Gender

Individuals were classified as either man or woman.

Class

The Venezuelan socioeconomic status system is divided into four categories: A/B (upper class), C (middle class), D (lower/working class), and E (poor). For the purpose of analysis, classes A, B, and C were grouped together. Given that those in categories D and E are the main victims of crime and violence as well as police brutality, it is possible that those in the working-class and poor categories would be more likely to support reforms.

Neighborhood

Individuals were classified as either living in a self-constructed barrio or living in another type of housing (e.g., an urbanization or industrial zone). We included this variable because most violent crime and police brutality occurs in poor areas of town (i.e., the barrios). It is likely that living in an insecure environment or being a victim of or witnessing police brutality would make one more likely to support security reforms.

Political Affiliation

We classified respondents as Chavista(s) (those who support the Chavista governments), opposition (those who oppose the Chavista governments), and neither-nors (those neither for nor against Chavista governments or opposing parties). It is likely that Chavistas would be the strongest supporters of reforms, given that the reforms were implemented by Chavista governments.