

6 The Evolution of Crime Policy and Attitudes Toward *Mano Dura* in Ecuador

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After a decade of low homicide rates and increasing security, 2021 marked a sharp reversal for Ecuador. The country's homicide rate increased faster than any other in Latin America, rising from a rate of 7.5 per 100,000 to 14 per 100,000 inhabitants, and total homicides jumping from 1,362 in 2020 to 2,464 in 2021. Much of this violence was centered in Guayaquil, the country's main cocaine exit point, as criminal gangs fought for control of neighborhoods around or leading to the port. Gang warfare also extended to the penitentiary system, where at least 329 detainees were massacred in a series of prison riots.² In addition, shocking and public displays of violence followed drug trafficking routes between Colombia and Guayaquil, including police assassinations, car bombings, and even the grisly scene of bodies hanging from a bridge in the city of Durán.³

In response to this spate of violence, President Guillermo Lasso responded with *mano dura* ("iron fist") policies, declaring multiple 60-day states of emergency in coastal provinces most wracked by violence, deploying the military to Guayas province to ensure citizen safety, and shaking up the national police leadership. These actions are consistent with promises that brought Lasso to power. In a campaign ad from January 28, 2021, the then-candidate stated:

The president of the republic has the obligation to politically support public security in Ecuador. Because being president of Ecuador is something very serious.... And if it is the will of the Ecuadorian people, we will take responsibility energetically. Applying an iron hand! Supporting the National Police! Supporting the Armed Forces! And taking responsibility for defending the honest citizens of this country.⁴

These policies appear to resonate with a rattled public. Both Guayaquil mayor Cynthia Viteri and Guayas prefect Susana González explicitly and repeatedly called for the application of *mano dura* at the provincial and country level,⁵ and in June 2022, the country's National Assembly was forced to approve a bill regulating the "legitimate and exceptional use of force" by the police, the armed forces, and prison guards to guarantee citizen security.⁶

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Notably, the violence and policy responses represent marked departures from Ecuador's recent past. In response to rising homicide rates and ineffective public security policies, the Rafael Correa administration (2007–2017) pursued several novel reforms to the punitive policies of the 1990s and early 2000s. During Correa's first term in power, these included the legalization of some of the country's largest street gangs, a reduction in drug sentences, and a higher threshold for imprisonment for theft. Later, his administration backtracked on some of these reforms—increasing sentences for drug traffickers and lowering the threshold for imprisonment—yet invested heavily in reforms to the national police and a new police management model which included an emphasis on outreach and community policing. The results were clear: the country's homicide rates more than halved in the 2010s, while the prison population nearly tripled. Perhaps driven by renewed violence stemming from gang warfare, however, this mixture of security policies is again giving way to the temptation of a hardline response in the 2020s.

As the editors to this volume ask, why is *mano dura* so alluring to voters and politicians? In this chapter, I offer an answer as I examine the drivers of public support for tough-on-crime policies. To better understand Ecuadorians' attitudes toward *mano dura*, I estimate a series of logistic regression models using survey data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) from 2004 to 2014. The results show that ideology, media exposure, education, age, and geographical location all play roles in driving public opinion toward punitive preferences, while socio-political context and crime victimization are not relevant predictors of support for *mano dura* in Ecuador. These findings are compatible with the surge in support for hardline policies in the 2020s. I speculate that one explanation for the return to a tough-on-crime approach has to do with the visibility and nature of the violence in the country, which is rich fodder for the media and politicians.

The chapter begins with an examination of the trends in gangs, organized crime, and violence in Ecuador. The next section describes how governments have combated criminal groups, narcotrafficking, and violence, from a hardline approach in the 1990s and 2000s, to the adoption of an innovative “state of guarantees” model under Rafael Correa, to the readoption of some punitive policies in the 2010s and especially in the 2020s. This is followed by a quantitative examination of Ecuadorian citizens' attitudes toward *mano dura* using the LAPOP data, as well as an interpretation of these results considering Guillermo Lasso's policy proposals. The final section examines the implications of these findings and countrywide policy trends.

Street Gangs, Organized Crime, and Violence in Ecuador

Ecuador's strategic geography and endemic corruption have made the country attractive to criminal groups of different stripes. Among other things, the

country is a major trans-shipment hub for Peruvian and Colombian cocaine trafficked to the United States and Western and Central Europe. Poor border control, weak rule of law, and limited bilateral cooperation have allowed narcotrafficking to flourish. Additionally, developments in the 2010s, including the Colombian peace process and the consolidation of Mexican criminal organizations in the global cocaine market, have bumped Ecuador into a more valuable position in the drug trafficking value chain by increasing its participation in the production, refinement, storage, and transportation of illicit drugs.⁷

Several criminal groups compete for power, from street gangs to prison gangs and drug trafficking organization (DTOs) to foreign organized crime organizations. The first of these, street gangs, emerged in the 1980s after deported U.S. gang members found a receptive audience among marginalized youth in the poorest neighborhoods of Quito and especially Guayaquil. These groups—divided into *naciones* and *pandillas*—were territorial, and the violence between them led to high homicide rates and notoriety in the press. The biggest *naciones* were the transnational Latin Kings and Queens (officially called the Sacred Tribe Atahualpa of Ecuador) and the Ñetas, while domestic groups included the Masters of the Street.⁸ However, these street gangs have been in decline since the mid-2000s because of police reform, gang legalization, and government policies aimed at increasing social inclusion of gang members.

Far more dangerous and relevant in the 2020s are organized crime groups engaged in drug trafficking as well as human smuggling, arms trafficking, and money laundering. The growth of national and international organized gangs is associated with the combination of the country's strategic geographical location and its numerous sea and river ports, the spillover effects from Colombia's internal conflict and its peace process, and fragile rule of law.⁹ Weak border controls and an unwillingness of the Ecuadorian military to intervene exacerbate these problems.¹⁰ As in other countries, organized crime is most successful in regions with low stateness, where groups can take advantage of a lack of government control.

Ecuador's most powerful mafia-style groups have traditionally operated in collaboration with foreign DTOs, particularly from Colombia and Mexico, to facilitate transport and logistics. Until 2021, the largest of these was Los Choneros, which evolved from an armed branch of a Colombian DTO in the 1990s to the country's fiercest prison gang by the 2010s and a partner of Mexico's Sinaloa cartel.¹¹ Since the 2010s, Los Choneros have been engaged in narcotrafficking, contract killings, extortion, and contraband smuggling. Despite their origins in Manabí Province, the group has a presence throughout Ecuador's coast, and its membership surpassed an estimated 12,000 by 2020. In fact, Los Choneros outsourced some operations to other criminal groups, such as the Chone Killers and Tiguerones, which operated at the provincial level.¹²

However, the assassination of Los Choneros' leader, Jorge Luis Zambrano, alias Rasquiña, on December 28, 2020, shattered the group's hegemony, creating

a criminal power vacuum and upsetting the balance of power among gangs. It was also the spark which triggered the country's spike in violence. Competition over the group's leadership as well as access to the highly profitable drug trafficking business fragmented Los Choneros internally and encouraged allied gangs to defect. According to InSight Crime, the Tiguerones, Chone Killers, Pipos, and Lobos united in a new structure called New Generation (a reference to their relationship with Mexico's Jalisco New Generation Jalisco Cartel, CJNG), which has engaged in a cycle of violence with Los Choneros.¹³ This has played out in the penitentiary system as well as on the streets.

Beyond domestic groups, foreign criminal groups also have a presence in the country. Prior to its demobilization under the terms of its 2016 peace agreement, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) managed drug and illegal mining operations along the Ecuador–Colombia border, while since that time the National Liberation Army (ELN) has occupied a similar role.¹⁴ Colombian criminal groups (*bandas criminales*), including the powerful Clan del Golfo or Urabebes, are also reportedly active in narcotics trafficking in Ecuador. Authorities have also accused Mexican DTOs, including the CJNG and Sinaloa cartel, of collaborating with and subcontracting to local criminal gangs.¹⁵ Finally, there is some evidence that organized crime groups from places as far away as Albania and China are engaged in illegal activities in Ecuador.¹⁶

Patterns of narcotrafficking help explain the geography of violence in Ecuador. Aggregated numbers from 2012 to 2018 show that the seven coastal provinces (Esmeraldas, Manabí, Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas, Los Ríos, Santa Elena, Guayas, El Oro) account for approximately 70 percent of the country's homicides and murders, with Guayaquil and environs the epicenter of violence.¹⁷ However, rates have not remained consistent over time. As Figure 6.1 shows, countrywide homicide rates more than doubled from the early 1990s until 2008, after which they dropped precipitously. In 2009, more than 2,600 people were killed, a homicide rate of nearly 18 per 100,000, almost twice the level the World Health Organization considers an epidemic. However, by 2018, the country recorded 5.8 killed per 100,000, one of Latin America's lowest figures.

Over that same period, the country's prison population and incarceration rate tripled, from a rate of 78 per 100,000 in 2010 to 229 per 100,000 in 2019. Although this trend is roughly the inverse of the country's homicide rate, as displayed in Figure 6.1, the two trends are likely unrelated. Instead, the rise in incarceration is largely a function of policy changes rather than abrupt shifts in the behavior of gangs and organized crime. One of the main reasons was the exponential growth in the use of preventative detention (incarcerating those awaiting trial), especially on drug crimes, following reforms to the penal code in March 2010. There are a few explanations for the decrease in homicide rate. Many of these focus on the effects of police reform and modernization, including the reorganization and expansion of its Community Police force in 2011, investments in smart policing, and an increase in police salaries,¹⁸ while others

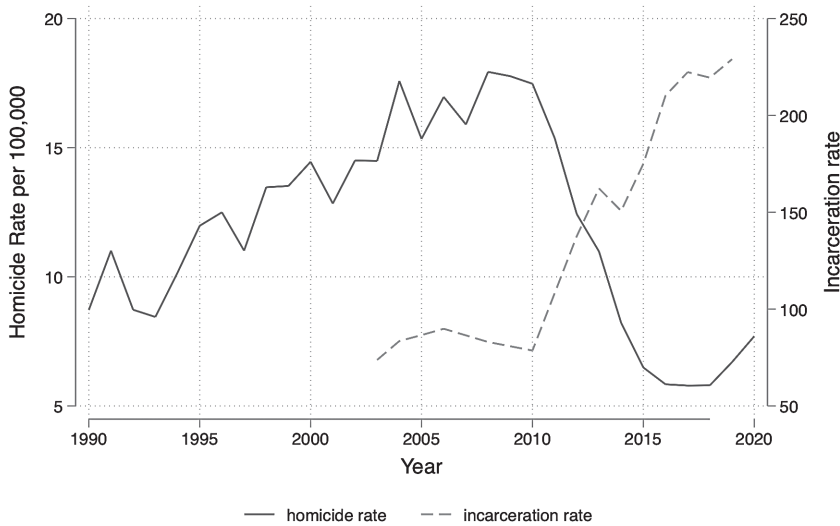


Figure 6.1 Homicide and Incarceration Rates in Ecuador.

Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

argue that the plummeting murder rate was a consequence of gang legalization and social inclusion strategies launched in 2007.¹⁹ None suggest that *mano dura* was responsible for the country's success.

***Mano Dura* and Shifting Government Policy**

Mano dura refers to the application of repression to achieve public order, although it remains a “thick concept” lacking scholarly consensus on its full attributes. The editors of this volume, for example, argue that it comprises four dimensions, namely longer and/or expedited sentences, extralegal detention, limits of due process rights, and the militarization of domestic security. Others, like Robert Muggah and John de Boer, propose that *mano dura* policies consist of the combination of three sets of measures which distinguish them from strict zero tolerance style approaches to crime prevention and criminal justice: repressive measures against low-level crimes and criminals; reductions and suspension of procedural rights and legal safeguards; and the deployment of the military for internal policing.²⁰ In their view, law enforcement, the courts, and legislators contribute in different ways to each of these sets of measures. Regardless of the specific definition, scholars agree that *mano dura* often entails the excessive use of military and police force to address crime control and public security.

Since re-democratization in 1979, Ecuadorian leaders have adopted a mixed approach to public security: at no point has the Ecuadorian government

completely suspended procedural rights or extralegal detentions, nor has it completely repudiated the militarization of domestic security to guarantee public safety. Instead, administrations have pursued some combination of tough-on-crime policies with prevention measures, rehabilitation, and social inclusion. Ecuadorian governments' different approaches can be divided into roughly three periods: (1) Crackdowns on low-level offender and high incarceration rates following rising violence in the late 1990s and early 2000s, (2) a rethinking of security policy which involved police modernization, management reform, and community outreach efforts from 2007 to roughly 2020, and (3) renewed efforts to employ a punitive approach following decreases in the police budget and the spike in violence in the 2020s.

1990–2007: Tough-on-Crime

Ecuador experienced a steady increase in its levels of violence and insecurity in the 1980s and 1990s. The homicide rate grew from 6.4 per 100,000 in 1980 to 10.4 in 1990 and 14.8 in 1999, and property crimes and delinquency also rose. The intensification of the Colombian conflict in the late 1990s and early 2000s also had an impact on the growth of transnational crimes and other illicit activities. Yet government policies to control these problems were often reactive and superficial, characterized by low levels of public investment.²¹ For example, to deal with an estimated 1,000 street gangs, the Guayaquil police force created the Special Anti-Gang Group in 1987.²² A succession of policies conspired to increase the incarceration rate without improving safety, including a draconian anti-drug framework which harshly penalized any form of illegal drug possession (1991), reforms to the Code of Criminal Procedure which strengthened the accusatory power of the state (2000), and the so-called *detención en firme*, a type of preventative and indefinite pre-trial detention unique to the Ecuadorian penal code (implemented in 2003, repealed in 2006).²³

The most punitive of these was the “Law on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances,” better known as Law 108. Passed in 1991, Law 108 criminalized drug use, placing use or dependence into the same category as drug production and trafficking. It also set out mandatory minimum sentencing for this entire range of drug offenses, a mechanism commonly used at that time in the U.S. for drug-related crimes. Cracking down on low-level offenders and offenses and reducing the accused’s procedural rights are paradigmatic characteristics of a *mano dura* approach. One of the main impetuses behind Law 108 was pressure from the U.S.²⁴ When the U.S. government’s Andean Initiative began in 1989, economic and military assistance to the Andean region increased significantly, with assistance conditioned on compliance with drug control objectives and programs consistent with the war on drugs. Predictably, this law did not decrease violent crime in Ecuador; instead, the country’s homicide rate increased along with incarceration.

2007–2020: Rethinking *Mano Dura* and a Contradictory Approach

The government of Rafael Correa reconsidered the country's approach to crime, and while it did not completely reject *mano dura*, it did realize significant changes. Correa portrayed his left-wing "Citizens' Revolution" as a break with the country's "long and sad neoliberal night" and sought to implement radical reforms to demarcate his government from those of his predecessors.²⁵ Among those were changes to the country's crime prevention model. There were two chief moments: (1) the "state of guarantees" from 2007 to 2009, characterized by the deepening of the constitutional state of rights and justice, gang legalization, and drug policy focused on rehabilitation, and (2) the counterreform beginning in 2010, characterized by a contradictory penal policy of drug penalization and lower thresholds for preventive detention, but a commitment to gang legalization, greater security investment, and a new police management model.

The first major change was gang legalization and resulting efforts at social inclusion.²⁶ This process dated to 2004, with a dialogue between Guayaquil's largest gangs, and continued in 2005 when professors Mauro Cerbino and Ana Rodríguez met with the leaders of the Latin Kings and Queens in Quito to present a framework that would include formal government recognition as well as social reinsertion. On August 2, 2007, the Correa administration accepted this proposal, agreeing to legalize a certain number of street gangs. In doing so, the state rejected suppression in favor of a long-term strategy of crime reduction through prevention and intervention. This holistic approach included job creation and educational outreach as well as cultural activities and the recognition of gangs as cultural street organizations.²⁷ Inter-gang violence dropped and homicide rates fell, facts which David C. Brotherton and Rafael Gude attribute to this legalization process.²⁸

A second policy change revolved around the country's anti-drug policy. Initially, Correa's government was vocally opposed to the U.S. war on drugs and Ecuador's harsh anti-drug laws, including criminal penalties imposed by Law 108.²⁹ On July 4, 2008, the country's Constituent Assembly issued a pardon to all drug trafficking mules who had been detained for transporting up to two kilos of any illicit drug, provided they had served 10 percent of the time of the imposed sentence and were not repeat offenders, releasing 2,223 people out of a prison population of 13,532.³⁰ The Montecristi Constitution, approved in September 2008, then explicitly prohibited the criminalization of illegal drug users, stating that "addictions are a public health problem" and adding that "[i]n no case shall their criminalization or infringement of their rights be allowed."³¹

A third major policy change came in March 2009, when the National Assembly promoted reforms that reduced the penalty for property crimes as well as preventative detention. Through this, theft was converted into an "infraction" (*contravención*) instead of robbery or theft if the amount of assets was less than two basic salaries (US\$654), an increase from the threshold of a single salary

(US\$327). It also decriminalized writing checks without provision of funds and turned preventative detention into a measure of last resort.³²

However, beginning in 2010, the Correa administration shifted gears and began to pursue a contradictory mixture of hardline and progressive security policies. On March 23, 2010, the Correa-controlled National Assembly reversed the previous year's progressive reforms, due in part to media attention on a perceived increase in criminality.³³ This punitive penal code reform reduced the threshold for *contravención* from \$654 to just \$163.50—half a basic salary, and half of the threshold prior to 2009—extended the maximum preventative detention from 7 days to 30, and elevated the crime of theft to a public action infraction.³⁴ In another hardline change, the Comprehensive Organic Penal Code, passed in August 2014, increased mandatory prison sentences on a range of crimes, from robbery to sexual assault to murder.

Similarly, in 2015, Correa moved to reverse the progressive drug policies he had helped usher in through the Law on Prevention of Drugs and Use or Consumption of Substances Classified as Subject to Oversight. In public statements, the president expressed regret at light sentences for microtraffickers, saying: “We’re going to rectify this [law] and show zero tolerance for drugs.”³⁵ He noted that since preventative detention did not apply to crimes with less than one-year sentences, small-scale drug dealers could skip their trial hearings and continue to deal. The new law instead increased penalties for drug possession, imposed preventative detention for low-level drug possession, and essentially re-criminalized drug use. As with the penal code reforms, this led to a spike in the prison population.

At the same time, the government introduced new law enforcement standards, invested in data-driven policing tools, and pursued innovative social programs, all of which helped to dramatically lower violence. For instance, the administration doubled the total training time required to become an officer, from nine to 18 months, and it required that high-ranking officers hold a university degree. The government also attempted to crack down on police corruption, requiring in 2013 that any officer in line for a promotion, involved in intelligence work, or working in neighborhoods known for organized crime pass a lie-detector test, undergo a psychological profile, and allow their personal finances to be scrutinized. More than 1,000 officers were fired or charged with crimes as a result.³⁶ The government balanced these demands by significantly raising starting salaries.

Indeed, the Correa administration invested heavily in state security, increasing spending from 1 percent of the fiscal budget to 2.3 percent. In addition to salaries, much of this was directed to improving police technical and operative capacity. The government allocated \$320 million in 2008 to strengthen the logistics equipment of the National Police, quadrupled the number of police vehicles, and invested \$94 million in police training programs.³⁷ Some of the heaviest investment was in modern policing tools. The national police adopted

COMPSTAT (“Comparative Statistics” or *Cuadro de mando integral*), the computerization and quantification program to improve efficiency and productivity. This process was then fed by the David system, an inter-institutional information system with the capacity to translate different police and judicial sources into a standardized language and establish comparisons, find pertinent recurrences, extrapolate results, projections, and trends for the design of public policies. In February 2012, the government also launched the Chinese-made ECU-911. This program integrated the national emergency call center and extensive video surveillance into a single system, with a high level of technological infrastructure, with the purpose of improving inter-institutional coordination work in citizen response to security emergencies.

This monetary investment was accompanied by a new system of police organization and decentralization, as well as a reorientation toward community policing. The number of national police increased from 38,000 in 2009 to 50,000 in 2018, with the majority of those consisting of Community Police Units (UPCs).³⁸ Leadership emphasized police patrols on foot or on bicycle and demanded that officers work with the communities they were protecting. The government installed more than one million emergency buttons in public spaces and businesses, which are connected to the closest UPC station. This strategy seems to have achieved results. Using geotagged crime data, Daniel Castro-Aniyar and Juan Carlos Jácome find that proximity to communitarian police headquarters and community policing strategies were associated with decreased crime.³⁹

The 2020s: A Return to Mano Dura

Still, the temptation of *mano dura* persisted as crime and violence rose under the Lenín Moreno administration (2017–2021) and especially that of Guillermo Lasso (2021–present). Since late 2020, the fragmentation of criminal gangs and competition over valuable narco-trafficking routes have led to increased street violence and record prison violence. Homicide rates have skyrocketed, and neighborhoods in Guayaquil, the country’s main exit point for cocaine trafficking, are regularly the sites of gang clashes. In February 2022, two bodies were left hanging from a pedestrian bridge over a major road in the nearby city of Durán, a public display of brutality previously unheard of in Ecuador.⁴⁰ The Litoral prison in Guayaquil is also the epicenter of this gang war, where at least three gruesome massacres took place in 2021, killing over 200 prisoners.⁴¹ Compounding issues, a scathing 2022 report from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) found not only that the country lacks a comprehensive policy for dealing with prison violence but that austerity measures have weakened state security capacity.⁴²

The Lasso government’s response to these security challenges conform closely to Muggah and de Boer’s three dimensions of *mano dura* and at least two of the dimensions laid out by the editors in the introduction to this volume: (1) it has pursued crackdowns against low-level crimes and criminals through

application of drug laws, (2) suspended procedural rights and legal safeguards through two states of exception, and (3) militarized the security response in Guayaquil.⁴³

Crackdowns on many low-level offenses has been the rule since 2010. The Correa administration's reforms to the penal code and punitive 2015 drug law have sent a record number of people to prison. As of November 2021, 36,600 inmates were held in prisons designed to hold 30,000. The IACHR report attributes the booming prison population to "the handing down of longer prison sentences; the expansion of crimes deemed worthy of incarceration; anti-drugs policies; and the excessive use of preventive detention."⁴⁴ This has probably contributed to prison violence. The report notes that most inmates murdered in 2021 were young people who found themselves in preventive detention accused of committing minor offences. This is consistent with the findings of Benjamin Lessing, who argues that higher incarceration rates helped to consolidate Brazilian prison gangs and project power onto the streets.⁴⁵

In terms of legal safeguards and militarization, the Lasso government has declared three 60-day states of exception in 2021 and 2022, allowing the armed forces to conduct security operations alongside the police in the provinces of Manabí, Santa Elena, El Oro, Los Ríos, Esmeraldas, Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas, Pichincha, and Sucumbíos. The president also announced the creation of a "unit for the legal defense of public security" to defend members of the police and military facing charges over actions undertaken in the line of duty and ordered a troop surge to Guayaquil in January 2022.⁴⁶

Popularity of *Mano Dura* Policies in Ecuador

Research suggests several explanations for citizens' embrace of *mano dura*. A first interpretation links penal policies to voters' partisan ideology. At its core, this argument posits that right-wing voters are more likely to care more about crime than left-wing voters, that ideology predicts both the extent to which people worry about social threats and the extent to which they support harsh punitive measures, and that conservative politicians favor and implement punitive approaches to crime based on ideological principle.⁴⁷ Related to this, other scholars suggest that a punitive approach to crime is a platform that politicians instrumentally adopt for electoral or organizational purposes.⁴⁸

Other explanations link *mano dura* to socio-political conditions and the prevalence or increase of violence or criminality. Lucia Dammert and Mary Fran T. Malone, for example, make the case that fear of crime in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile are what allow individuals to justify a zero-tolerance approach to security, while Giancarlo Visconti shows that crime victimization in Brazil has a substantive and meaningful effect on victims' policy preferences.⁴⁹ In the latter case, crime victims are more likely to support *mano dura* measures to reduce crime. Visconti argues that affected citizens may value

democracy less, which in turn explains their willingness to overlook the erosion of basic rights in favor of drastic measures to combat delinquency. Relating to this climate of fear and greater tolerance of *mano dura*, a host of scholars show how media coverage of crime may also shape individuals' attitudes and policy preferences.⁵⁰ Krystin Krause finds that crime news in Guatemala influences support for "authoritarian crime control" through lowering citizen trust in government institutions. Exposure to crime news also affects self-reported victimization rates and levels of support for a presidential candidate promoting *mano dura* policies.⁵¹

Data and Method

To test these explanations for Ecuador, I use data from five waves of surveys from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP).⁵² Each wave consists of 1,500 randomly sampled individuals from across the country. To operationalize the dependent variable, "support for *mano dura*," I use the variable for which respondents answered the question: "Do you think that our country needs a government with *mano dura*, or do you think that the problems can be solved with the participation of all?" Figure 6.2 plots the two responses for each survey wave, with support for *mano dura* decreasing from its peak of 40 percent in 2004 to just above 20 percent in 2010.

The models use a battery of independent variables to test the range of plausible explanations (descriptive statistics are included in the Appendix).

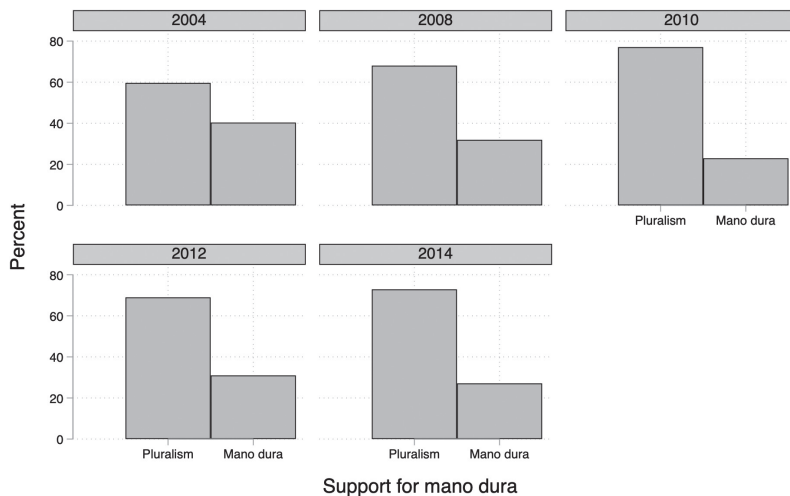


Figure 6.2 Support for *Mano Dura* Policies Over Time.

Source: Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)

Ideology

- Respondent's left–right ideological self-placement (ten-point scale).

Socio-political perceptions

- Three variables as proxies: “interpersonal trust,” a four-point indicator of a respondent's trust in others, “satisfaction,” a four-point indicator of a respondent's life satisfaction, and “trust in judicial system,” a four-point indicator in trust in the judicial system if being the victim, of robbery or assault in the preceding twelve months.
- Four additional measures of neighborhood perceptions of criminality and rule of law collected only in the 2014 survey wave: “Neighborhood security,” measured on a four-point scale, “Perception of neighborhood violence” and “tendency of neighborhood violence” each measured on a three-point scale, and “satisfaction with neighborhood police work” measured on a four-point scale.
- Lastly, “perceptions of immigrants” (2008 and 2010 only), a dummy variable which captures whether respondents believe immigrants improved or worsened crime.

Crime Victimization

- “Victimization,” a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent had been the victim of a crime in the preceding twelve months.

Media Effects

- Indicators for mode and frequency of media consumption: “listens to news on radio,” “watches news on television,” and “reads news in newspaper,” all measured on a four-point ordinal scale. Since these data were only collected in the first three survey waves (2004, 2006, 2008), I only include these in the tests using sub-samples (i.e., Models 4 and 5).

Control Variables

- Sex of the respondent (man = 0, woman = 1), age, education level (ordinal variable from 0 to 20), urban (=0) or rural (=1) location, and household income bracket (different ordinal scales in 2004–2010 and 2012–2014). Model 4 includes an indicator only available in 2004 which combines region (coast, highlands, Amazon) with urban or rural setting.

To test the effects of these covariates, I employ a series of logistic regression models in Stata 17. Models 1–3 include data from all survey waves, with survey wave dummies included in Model 1 to control for time-specific effects.

However, to test some independent variables that were only collected in certain waves, Models 4–6 test data from 2004, 2008, and 2014, respectively. Testing the data through a multi-level logistic estimator does not alter the results.

Results

As Tables 6.1 and 6.2 show, evidence supports several of the hypotheses. To begin, “ideology” is positive and significant to the 0.001 level in four of the six models, suggesting that the further right-of-center the respondent, the more they support *mano dura*. This is consistent with findings by Monica M. Gerber and Jonathan Jackson and others.⁵³ The variable fails to achieve statistical significance in Models 3 and 6, which only test survey waves 2012–2014 and 2014, respectively. One explanation for this divergence is that respondents were swayed by the adoption of some *mano dura* policies by then-president Correa, a leftist, after 2010. Given Correa’s high public approval, it is plausible that self-identified

Table 6.1 Baseline Logistic Regression Models of Support for *Mano Dura* Policies (2004–2014)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Left–right ideology	0.034*** (0.007)	0.048*** (0.009)	–0.013 (0.014)
Interpersonal trust	–0.007 (0.020)	0.052* (0.024)	–0.200*** (0.042)
Life satisfaction	–0.092*** (0.025)	–0.117*** (0.031)	–0.108* (0.048)
Trust in judicial system	–0.004 (0.018)	0.014 (0.022)	–0.081* (0.036)
Sex	–0.052 (0.036)	–0.021 (0.044)	–0.088 (0.068)
Age	0.008*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)
Household Income (2004–2010)		0.013 (0.015)	
Household Income (2012–2014)			–0.015 (0.010)
Education	–0.043*** (0.005)	–0.051*** (0.006)	–0.040*** (0.009)
Urban–rural	–0.199*** (0.038)	–0.218*** (0.047)	–0.257*** (0.075)
Year dummies	Yes	One	One
Constant	–0.122 (0.150)	592.037*** (44.369)	194.398* (81.565)
N	15,685	10,719	4,127
Pseudo R2	0.0217	0.0291	0.0156

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 6.2 Extended Logistic Regression Models of Support for *Mano Dura* Policies

	Model 4(2004)	Model 5(2008)	Model 6(2014)
Left-right ideology	0.055*** (0.012)	0.042** (0.013)	-0.030 (0.029)
Interpersonal trust	0.026 (0.029)	0.051 (0.036)	-0.051 (0.089)
Life satisfaction	0.039 (0.033)	0.024 (0.045)	-0.077 (0.099)
Trust in judicial system	0.050 (0.026)	0.038 (0.032)	-0.083 (0.079)
Sex	-0.177*** (0.052)	0.012 (0.064)	-0.068 (0.147)
Age	0.007*** (0.002)	0.007** (0.002)	0.013* (0.005)
Household Income (2004–2010)	-0.002 (0.013)	0.019 (0.022)	
Household Income (2012–2014)			0.004 (0.019)
Education	-0.036*** (0.007)	-0.050*** (0.009)	-0.057** (0.022)
Urban-rural		-0.118 (0.068)	-0.076 (0.163)
Crime victimization	-0.016 (0.070)	-0.082 (0.074)	
Listens to news on radio (Baseline=Often)			
Once or twice a week	-0.386*** (0.074)	-0.386*** (0.074)	
Rarely	-0.455*** (0.064)	-0.176* (0.082)	
Never	-0.392*** (0.089)	(0.059) (0.101)	
Watches news on television (Baseline=Often)			
Once or twice a week	0.227** (0.074)	0.091 (0.081)	
Rarely	-0.030 (0.084)	-0.107 (0.122)	
Never	0.484** (0.163)	-0.107 (0.261)	
Reads news in newspaper (Baseline=Often)			
Once or twice a week	-0.089 (0.079)	-0.277** (0.092)	
Rarely	0.067 (0.074)	-0.183* (0.091)	
Never	0.035 (0.094)	-0.627*** (0.114)	

(Continued)

Table 6.2 (Continued)

	Model 4(2004)	Model 5(2008)	Model 6(2014)
Immigrants to blame		(0.121)	
		(0.102)	
Region (<i>baseline=Coast-urban</i>)			
Coast-rural	-0.406*** (0.094)		
Sierra-urban	-0.578*** (0.068)		
Sierra-rural	-0.769*** (0.083)		
Oriente-urban	-0.701*** (0.095)		
Oriente-rural	-0.609*** (0.114)		
Perception of neighborhood violence			-0.045 (0.139)
Tendency of neighborhood violence			0.279* (0.140)
Satisfaction with police in neighborhood			0.022 (0.104)
Robberies in neighborhood			-0.262 (0.157)
Constant	-0.122 (0.150)	-0.506 (0.358)	-0.182 (0.795)
<i>N</i>	7,044	4,782	944
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.0373	0.0227	0.0254

leftists were more amenable to the president's use of *mano dura* when they were interviewed in 2012 and 2014.

The variables that measure socio-political perceptions and crime victimization are less promising. "Life satisfaction" is negative and significant across Models 1–3 but fails to reach statistical significance in the other three models. Likewise, "interpersonal trust" is significant in two models, albeit with different signs in each, while "trust in the judicial system" finds statistical significance in only a single model ($p < 0.05$). Views toward immigrants is not significant, nor are three of four variables which measure neighborhood perceptions of criminality and rule of law. Most notably, crime victimization does not have any perceptible effect on attitudes toward *mano dura*, contradicting Visconti's findings from Brazil.⁵⁴

The effects of the media on respondents' attitudes require some parsing. For the 2004 survey wave (Model 4), listening to the radio increases respondents' support for tough-on-crime policies, consistent with scholarly expectations.⁵⁵ However, this should be interpreted with some caution since the results are less

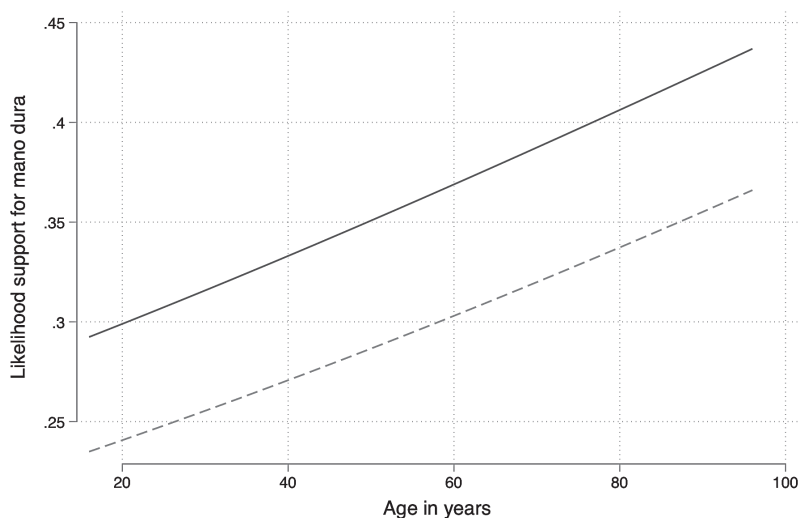


Figure 6.3 Predicted Relationship Between Age and Support for *Mano Dura* by Ideological Self-Identification, All Other Variables at Their Mean (Model 4).

robust for the 2008 wave. Conversely, “reads news in newspaper” is significant and in the expected direction for all categories in the 2008 wave (Model 5) but fails to reach significance for the 2004 wave. “Watched news on television” is only significant for two values in Model 4. In short, results are mixed and suggest different media effects depending on the survey wave.

Lastly, of the demographic variables, age, education, and urban–rural location are significant across almost all models. Consistent with Jonathan D. Rosen and Sebastián Cutrona’s findings from Brazil and Colombia, older respondents are more likely to support hardline crime policies.⁵⁶ Along these lines, less formal education is associated with a preference for *mano dura*, as is living in an urban location. Model 4’s results show, furthermore, that coastal urban dwellers are far more likely to support *mano dura* than urban or rural inhabitants from other parts of the country.

A look at the substantive effects shows the relative import of the demographic variables. Figure 6.3 illustrates the predicted probabilities of support for *mano dura* while varying age and setting ideology at its two extremes, with all other variables held at their means. As it shows, while statistically significant, ideology exercises only a small substantive effect—about a five percentage-point increase in support for *mano dura* from the furthest left to the furthest right ideological self-placement. Instead, age appears to be a stronger predictor, from 23 percent to 37 percent for leftists and 29 percent to nearly 44 percent for rightists across the range of observed ages (16–96).

Similarly, Figure 6.4 plots the relationship between education and support for *mano dura* by region and urban/rural setting. “Urban-coast”—long the

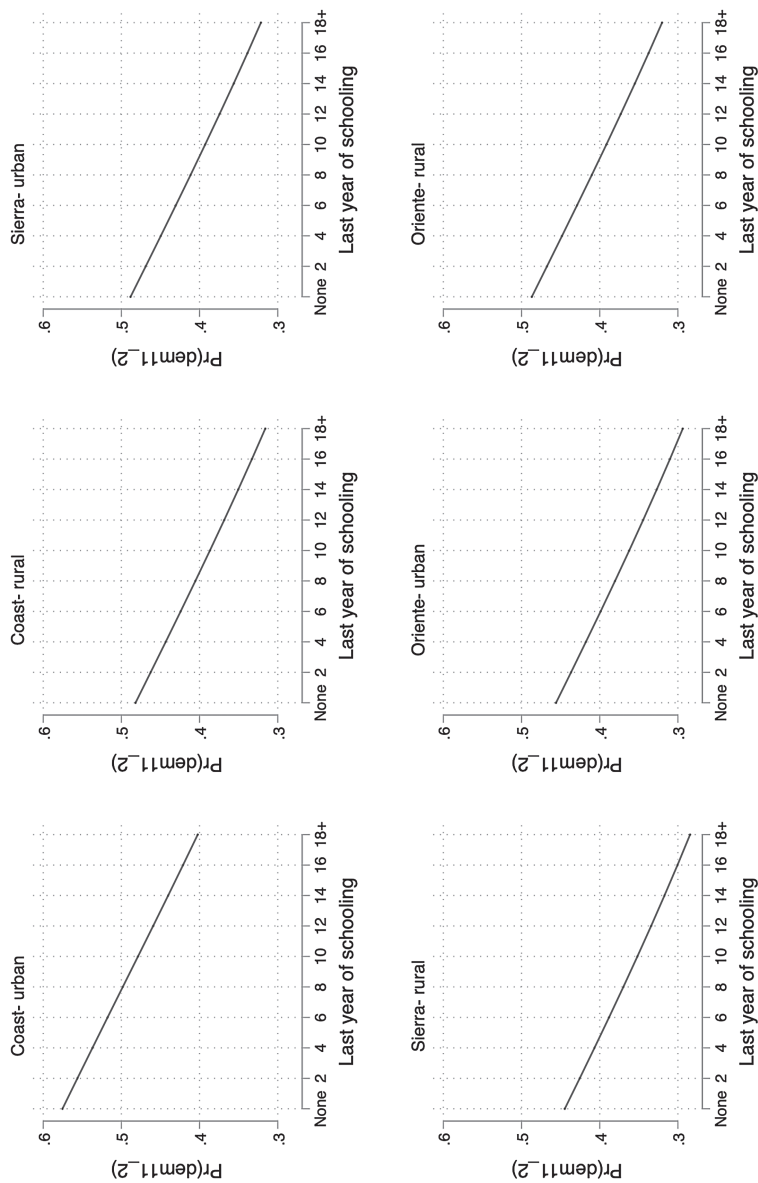


Figure 6.4 Predicted Relationship Between Education and Support for *Mano Dura* by Region, All Other Variables at Their Mean (Model 4).

most violent part of the country—has the respondents with the highest support for tough-on-crime policy, about ten percentage points higher than the other five regions. However, the impact of education is immense, decreasing around 18 percentage points from the least amount of schooling to the most amount of schooling. In short, many of the most important conditions driving support for different approaches to crime are not necessarily context dependent, but demographic and educational characteristics.

Implications and the Future of *Mano Dura* in Ecuador

Dating to the country's re-democratization in 1979, leaders have continually resorted to tough-on-crime policies when faced with increases in violence. Even the most left-leaning leader of Ecuador's democratic history, Rafael Correa, combined a rehabilitative gang legalization strategy, investment in police modernization, and an emphasis on community policing with a punitive approach to drugs and low-level crimes. The right-wing Lasso administration has gone further. Faced with gang fragmentation and warfare and unprecedented levels of street and prison violence, Lasso campaigned in part on pursuing a hardline toward criminals. As of this writing, he had declared 60-day states of emergency three times as president, deployed the armed forces to Guayas province, and appointed hardliners to lead the national police and run the Ministry of Defense. Importantly, he appears to have done this with the support of Ecuadorian citizens and other politicians—especially on the right.

Regression models using survey data from LAPOP show that ideology, media exposure, education, age, and geographical location all help shape public opinion toward crime policy. Consistent with scholarly work by Mayer and Tiberj and Gerber and Jackson, the further right a respondent's ideology, the more likely they are to support *mano dura*.⁵⁷ However, a substantive interpretation shows that this effect is smaller over the range of possible ideological values in comparison to demographic variables like age or education—a finding shared in part by Rosen and Cutrona.⁵⁸ Similarly, the results support arguments that crime coverage in the media and exposure to crime news affects levels of support for authoritarian crime control.⁵⁹ A paucity of statistically significant results for other variables, on the other hand, contradicts findings that individuals' fear of crime or even crime victimization affects victims' policy preferences.⁶⁰

The results not only help explain support for Lasso's crime policies but suggest that a *mano dura* approach will continue to be a favored option for the country's policymakers. The data indicate that between 30 percent and 40 percent of Ecuadorians support hardline security policies, with right-leaning, older, and less educated citizens all more likely to favor them. This indicates that there is a baseline constituency for whom *mano dura* is always a preferred option. Yet at least one important contextual factor, media exposure, can increase that foundation of support. Specifically, the tests suggest that higher levels of news

consumption are associated with increased support for *mano dura*. In this sense, the visibility and shocking nature of some of the country's violence may engender greater support for a tough-on-crime approach since it is more likely to be publicized by the media and consumed by citizens. As such, perceptions of insecurity and rising homicide rates in the 2020s suggest that appetites for *mano dura* in Ecuador are likely to increase.

Ecuador's security situation points to the limits of both *mano dura* as well as anti-*mano dura* policies. High incarceration rates throughout the 2010s led to prison overcrowding, providing kindling for violence amid the gang fragmentation which occurred with the assassination of Los Choneros' leader in December 2020. At the same time, limited gang legalization failed to preclude a rise in homicide rates, as newer, and more violent street and prison gangs have supplanted previous legalized groups. As with other countries in Latin America, Ecuador's fundamental security problem is one of rule of law, state capacity, and security capacity.

Governments seem to acknowledge the lack of results from *mano dura*. On the campaign trail—and in the same breath that he promised to bring an iron fist to security—Lasso promised a sweeping prison reform which would emphasize rehabilitation and argued for the necessity to reduce prison overcrowding and improve facilities. Indeed, in early 2022, Lasso announced the early release of 5,000 prisoners and the hire of 1,400 more prison guards.⁶¹ At the same time, there is likely an electoral imperative to be tough on crime—or to appear tough on crime.⁶² A complete reexamining of security policy may simply be untenable in an environment where an unpopular president is trying to combat DTOs and prison gangs. And while releasing less dangerous inmates may help mitigate some of the endemic prison violence, it ultimately does little to solve the root causes of the violence: a multi-actor gang war for control of the country's drug trafficking operations.

Appendix

Table 6.3 Descriptive Statistics

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
<i>Mano dura</i> preference	34,860	0.32	0.47	0	1
Demographic					
Sex	46,309	1.54	0.50	0	1
Age	46,272	39.08	15.22	16	96
Education	46,161	10.12	4.23	0	18
Income (old)	35,528	4.95	2.07	0	13
Income (new)	7,005	8.11	4.08	0	16
Ideology	32,179	5.39	2.34	1	10
Urban–rural	34,309	1.38	0.48	0	1
Region and strata	20,775	2.80	1.60	1	6

(Continued)

Table 6.3 (Continued)

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Community					
Interpersonal trust	45,602	2.29	0.92	1	4
Life satisfaction	45,996	1.86	0.76	1	4
Media					
News via radio	29,748	2.21	1.09	1	4
News via television	29,748	1.46	0.77	1	4
News via newspaper	29,709	2.62	0.99	1	4
Security					
Crime victimization past 12 months	29,687	1.82	0.38	0	1
Perception neighborhood violence	1,462	2.42	0.69	1	3
Tendency neighborhood violence	1,455	2.28	0.68	1	3
Neighborhood robberies	1,426	1.52	0.5	1	2
Rule of Law					
Trust in judicial system	45,066	2.93	1.00	1	4
Trust in police	8,925	2.85	0.94	1	4
Satisfaction neighborhood police	1,475	2.46	0.75	1	4
Immigration					
Immigrants' impact on crime	16,554	1.18	0.38	0	1

Notes

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